

Marian Studies

Volume 43 *Proceedings of the Forty-Third
National Convention of the Mariological Society
of America held in Houston, Tex.*

Article 6

1992

Presidential Address: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Evangelizer of the Americas

James McCurry

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McCurry, James (1992) "Presidential Address: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Evangelizer of the Americas," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 43, Article 6.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol43/iss1/6

This Front Matter is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE: EVANGELIZER OF THE AMERICAS

Presidential Address

On the 10th of January in this year 1992, I brought the prayerful greetings of our Mariological Society of America to His Holiness Pope John Paul II in a private Vatican audience. Our Lady of Guadalupe literally opened the doors of the papal chamber. One day earlier, on a routine working visit to Rome, a Franciscan confrere and I found ourselves at the Vatican. Rolled under my arm was a large and exquisitely embroidered tapestry of Our Lady of Guadalupe. A month before I had climbed the 206 steps of Tepeyac Hill in Mexico City to collect this tapestry from the cloistered Carmelite nuns who live perched atop the site of the 1531 apparitions. They had made this tapestry over a period of several months, in thanksgiving for extraordinary graces received, and presented it to my province of friars to serve as a touchstone for our Franciscan celebrations of the quincentenary of Christianity in the Americas. In Rome, I had merely hoped to leave the tapestry at the Vatican for the Pope's benediction and retrieve it a few days later. You can well appreciate my surprise when an official of the pontifical household exclaimed, "The Holy Father will bless it tomorrow, and you are invited." The "Mother of the Americas" does have some influence in high places.¹

¹All references to Our Lady of Guadalupe and to the 1531 apparitions have been compiled from materials *passim* in the following:

A Handbook on Guadalupe. Kenosha, Wisconsin: Franciscan Marytown Press. 1974.

Callahan, Philip S. and Jody B. Smith. *The Virgin of Guadalupe—An Infrared Study*. Unpublished research under the auspices of CARA, Washington, D.C. 1979.

Next day, when the Pope walked into the audience chamber where my confrere and I stood alone flanking the tapestry, the Holy Father's eyes immediately met hers; his head bowed deeply in prayer. The two of us friars felt like eavesdroppers on a silent conversation between two old friends enjoying a reunion. A unique spiritual rapport exists between Pope John Paul II and Our Lady of Guadalupe. For it was to this "Dark Virgin of Tepeyac," on the very first of his foreign pilgrimages as pope, in January 1979, that he entrusted the whole of his papacy's mission of evangelization—spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth.² The "evangelization" theme commands special attention during this 500th anni-

Carie, O.F.M. Conv., Fr. Giles. *Our Lady of Guadalupe*. Unpublished research under auspices of Conventual Franciscans of Our Lady of Guadalupe Custody, Mesilla Park, N.M. 1990.

Carroll, Dr. Warren H. *Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Conquest of Darkness*. Front Royal, Virginia: Christendom Press. 1983.

Cawley, O.C.S.O., Fr. Martinus, ed. *Anthology of Early Guadalupan Literature*. Lafayette, Oregon: Guadalupe Abbey. CARA Studies on Popular Devotion, Monograph 8. 1984.

Cawley, O.C.S.O., Fr. Martinus, ed. *Guadalupe: From the Aztec Language*. Lafayette, Oregon: Guadalupe Abbey. CARA Studies on Popular Devotion, Monograph 6. 1983.

Elizondo, Virgilio P. *La Morenita: Evangelizer of the Americas*. San Antonio, Texas: Mexican American Cultural Center. 1980.

Gonzales, Stella M. and Carmen G. Blasquez. *History of Mexico From Pre-Hispanic Times to the Present Day*. Mexico, D.F.: Panorama Editorial, S.A. 1987.

John Paul II, Pope. Talks in *L'Osservatore Romano: Weekly Edition in English*. Vatican City. 5 Feb. 1979. 12 Feb. 1979. 7 May 1990. 14 May 1990. 21 May 1990.

Johnston, Francis. *The Wonder of Guadalupe*. Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc. 1981.

Sennott, Thomas M. Unpublished research under auspices of St. Benedict Center, Still River, Mass. 1990.

Taylor, Dr. Mary. *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*. Unpublished research under auspices of Conventual Franciscans of Our Lady of Guadalupe Custody, Mesilla Park, N.M. 1990.

Vatican Council II. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. Gen. Ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Company. 1975 and 1984.

²Pope John Paul II, Homily at Guadalupe Basilica, 27 January 1979, *L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English* (Vatican City, 5 Feb. 1979), p. 6.

versary year of the coming of Christianity to the Americas. One generation after Columbus, the Tepeyac apparitions of "Our Lady of Guadalupe" initiated a growth in the Church on the American continent unprecedented in Christian history—with estimates of eight million converts in ten years. What is it about the Guadalupe Virgin, then and now, that so captivates people? Her name, her message, and her mission merge as a potent formula for spreading Christ's Gospel.

Briefly permit me to telescope our focus on these three aspects of the Guadalupan formula for evangelization: the Virgin's name, her message, and her mission. Her *name* "Our Lady of Guadalupe" (in Spanish, *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*) could not have been the actual title by which she identified herself to Juan Diego's uncle, Juan Bernardino, in the fifth and final of her 1531 apparitions. When the Virgin appeared in Tolpetlac at the dying uncle's sickbed, she spoke not Spanish but Nahuatl, the Aztec language. At the same time as he felt himself instantly cured, Juan Bernardino heard the Virgin identify herself by the title which would later be translated into Spanish as *Santa Maria de Guadalupe* ("Holy Mary of Guadalupe"). Modern linguistic scholars and philologists who have attempted to reconstruct the original Nahuatl title on the basis of phonetic equivalency note that the Aztec language had no *d* or *g* in its alphabet. The closest phonetic equivalent of *de Guadalupe* would have been *Te Coatloxopeuh* (pronounced Quat-la-su-pe), which literally means "one who crushes the stone serpent." The same experts point out that the feared Aztec god to whom thousands of human sacrifices were offered each year had the form of a serpent.

So while the Aztec populace heard with relief that the Virgin had come to crush this stone serpent, the Spaniard Bishop of Mexico, Friar Juan Zumarraga, providentially heard "Holy Mary of Guadalupe" (*de Guadalupe*), the name of an ancient Marian sanctuary in Spain's Extremadura region, where the Bishop (as well as Cortez and Columbus) had often gone on pilgrimage. By allowing a dual interpretation of her name, the Virgin of Tepeyac identified herself to both Aztec and Spaniard as a person sent by God for the

spiritual triumph of good over evil. Bishop Zumarraga, schooled in the Franciscan tradition of Immaculate Conception theology, further identified Our Lady of Guadalupe with the mystery of the Immaculate Conception. In a letter written by Zumarraga to Cortez less than two weeks after the final apparition, the Bishop refers to the sacred Image of the Virgin imprinted on Juan Diego's tilma as the "Immaculate Conception." Commentators note the association of Mary as the Immaculate Conception to the biblical "Protoevangelium" passage (Gen. 3:15), where the Woman and her Offspring unite to crush the head of the serpent. The tilma, depicting *Te Coatloxopeuh* for the Aztecs and the Immaculate Virgin *de Guadalupe* for the Spaniards, would have imaged for both races the hope for a gospel victory of good over evil.

The message spoken by the Virgin to Juan Diego resonated a tone of hope and compassion welcomed by Aztecs and Spaniards alike. Most significantly, however, her message to the Aztecs and Spaniards communicated *truth* about a merciful God: "I am the perfect and perpetual Virgin Mary, Mother of the True God, through whom everything lives, the Lord of all things, who is Master of Heaven and Earth." An Aztec king of Texcoco in the 1400s had dedicated a high tower without an idol to an "Unknown God," *Ipalnemo-huani* ("He through whom everything lives"). Now, the Tepayac Virgin reveals herself as mother of this "True God through whom everything lives." She affirms her capacity to unveil the truth about his merciful and universal love for all people: "I am your merciful Mother, the Mother of all who live united in this land, and of all those who have confidence in me. Here I will hear their weeping and their sorrows, and will remedy their sufferings, necessities, and misfortunes."

Her style of communicating this message suited the indigenous mentality. The Aztecs would have been unaccustomed to discursive instruction about the deepest of life's truths. For these indigenous peoples the medium through which truth could be transmitted was "flower and song." The most famous poet-king of Ancient Aztec Mexico, Nezahualcoyotl, wrote:

"My flowers shall not cease to live;
my songs shall never end:
I, a singer, intone them;
They become scattered, they are spread about."³

For these ancients, "flower and song" merge as a poetry originating from the innermost part of heaven, and constituting the only truth on earth. "Flower and Song" were essential to the indigenous peoples' concept of truth. The Tepeyac Virgin caused roses to grow in December and scattered them before the feet of the Bishop, at the same time as her words waxed poetic in their imagery: "Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not your fountain of life? Are you not in the folds of my mantle? In the crossing of my arms?" Our Lady spoke from Tepeyac as a poetic singer of truth, scattering roses as signs of God's merciful concern for each and every individual down through the ages.

Through her *name* and her *message*, the Guadalupe Virgin stood as a concrete antidote for the two chief obstacles to Christian evangelization among the indigenous peoples of Aztec Mexico. Those obstacles can be simply stated: 1) The Aztecs had no concept of absolute good. Everything for them was a dualistic mixture of good and evil. 2) They had no concept of the value of the individual person. Everything for them was subservient to the collective value of an impersonal society. The spiritual and socio-political impact of the Guadalupe apparitions would be the overturning of those viewpoints. For the first time ever, the Aztecs saw someone wholly good and wholly personal—an objective, yet personal, standard of good and evil. Her name bespoke an immaculate, absolute good. Her message communicated the reality of a personal, relational God—a God whose mother could even speak in signs and symbols comprehensible to simple, ordinary people. The two-punch effect of her name and her message would guarantee success to her mission.

The *mission* of Our Lady was expressed to the Aztec visionary of Tepeyac, Juan Diego, in these words: "I ardently

³Elizondo, p. 15.

desire a temple (*teocalli*) be built here for me where I will show and offer all my love, my compassion, my help and my protection to the people." *Teocalli* was the Aztec name for "house of god"—a sanctuary built atop the holy pyramids. Mary's mission at Tepeyac (itself a pyramid-shaped hill) was the work of Church-building. From this fact emerges Mary's general role in God's plan for the evangelization of the Americas. She would serve as catalyst in the construction of a new kind of "temple"—the building of a new people in Christ—the Church. Just as the medieval St. Francis of Assisi first interpreted Christ's command "Go rebuild my church" as referring to one particular chapel, so too the Franciscan Bishop Zumarraga would initially heed Our Lady's request for a *teocalli* by engaging Juan Diego and his compatriots in the building of a small hermitage at Tepeyac. Like Francis, however, Bishop Zumarraga soon realized that the mandate for church-building had far-reaching implications of enormous proportions.

Bishop Zumarraga and Juan Diego stand as the two key figures in God's plan—unfolded through the Guadalupe event—for the whole mission of evangelization in the Americas. The Bishop—a scholar, an ascetic, a humanitarian, as well as an astute politician—was appointed by Emperor Charles V as first bishop in the New World specifically to counterbalance the godless secular authorities and to instill among the Spanish *conquistadores* an enlightened Christian understanding of the indigenous peoples. Juan Diego—an early convert to the new religion, Christianity—has been likened to ancient biblical personages who were collective personalities. Pope John Paul II has noted that in a sense Juan Diego stands as a representative of the evangelized Church—of "all the indigenous people who accepted the Gospel of Jesus, thanks to the maternal aid of Mary."⁴ The work of Church-building would engage Juan Diego and Bishop Zumarraga initially, and widening circles of laity and hierarchy

⁴Pope John Paul II, Homily at Guadalupe Basilica, 6 May 1990, *L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English* (Vatican City, 14 May 1990), p. 5.

subsequently, in one united common enterprise: to build up the Mystical Body of Jesus as one People of God, the Church.

Little proof is needed to demonstrate that every aspect of this mission—instigated at the behest of the Tepeyac Virgin—was guided by the hand of Divine Providence. Juan Diego's indigenous name was Cuauhtlatohuac (pronounced Coot-la-to-wic), meaning "The Eagle Who Speaks." Holy Mary inspired him, just as she inspired St. John the Beloved Disciple—symbolized in Christian iconography as an "eagle." The Fourth Gospel and the Book of Revelation, both of which bear the Johannine imprint, can be seen to culminate in the image of a "woman clothed with the sun" (Rev. 12:1). Recognizing in this "woman" both Mary and the Church, Catholic tradition identifies the Blessed Virgin as "image . . . of the Church as she is to be perfected in the world to come."⁵ Bishop Zumarraga would explicitly associate the miraculous Image of the Virgin left on the tilma of Juan Diego with the "woman" of Revelation 12. Juan Diego and the laity recognized in the miraculous Image of the Tepeyac Virgin a virtual "blueprint" for the ideals of the Church that was to be spread throughout the new world. Juan Diego would use the tilma Image as a starting point in his seventeen-year lay apostolate of catechesis. As a mirror of the Church being established, the face on the tilma appropriately combines Spanish, Aztec, and Jewish features. The Church in the Americas would reconcile all races and classes under the sign of the Virgin Mother.

The Guadalupan formula for evangelization would prove successful because it remained simple. Her name, her message, and her mission merged visually in the miraculous Image that she left behind. Even today this Image belongs primarily to the poor and the simple; they share the "wealth" of its meaning with the rich, and through it spread the Gospel of Christ. Miraculous though its origin be, and extraordinary its history, the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe has remained firmly attached to the rugged, ordinary spirituality

⁵Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 68, in Flannery ed., p. 422.

of simple believers. Even the title by which she is today most commonly invoked, *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, is not accurately translated by the English equivalent "Our Lady." The English has a regal dignity about itself, more akin to the Spanish *Doña*. The Spanish *Señora* simply means a down-to-earth woman who looks after things. Evangelized believers in the generations after Juan Diego and Bishop Zumarraga, down through the present, have retained an authentic understanding of the Virgin of Tepeyac as a woman who is ours, one of our own.

In this presidential address I have tried to suggest how one might look at evangelization through a Guadalupean perspective. We are mindful in this quincentenary year that the upcoming International Mariological and Marian Congress in Huelva, Spain, has the title "Mary Star of Evangelization." That "star" rose over the Americas in the late fifteenth century as Columbus and his companions chanted the *Salve Regina* before landfall. That "star" would come to shine uniquely over the Americas a generation later as the Marian drama of Tepeyac unfolded to initiate an upbuilding of the Church that can only be described as miraculous—uniting indigenous Americans with Spanish newcomers under the mothering mantle of Holy Mary of Guadalupe. At the heart of the Guadalupe event there stands the Gospel's continuing power to captivate souls—and Mary's role as maternal evangelizer of that Good News.

JAMES E. MCCURRY, O.F.M.CONV.
Granby, MA
President,
The Mariological Society of America