

## The Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe – The Rev. Josefina Beecher

Every December 12 we celebrate the Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The readings for this day include the Magnificat (Luke 1:46b-55). Sometimes it includes a reading from Revelation, chapter 12: “A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” This seems to be a pretty accurate description of the image on the *tilma* in the basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

Latina Feminist Roman Catholic theologian Dr. Jeanette Rodriguez has written the definitive book on the Virgin of Guadalupe, in which she explains the apparently miraculous elements of the *Tilma* – the cloak that Juan Diego brought to the Bishop in Mexico City with the image of the Virgin on it. Rodriguez tells the story of Juan Diego, his ill uncle, and his encounter with the Virgin on the hill at Tepeyac. And most importantly she tells the stories of women whose faith in the Virgin of Guadalupe is central to their spirituality, and their ability to confront and endure or overcome life’s challenges. (Jeanette Rodriguez. *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment Among Mexican-American Women*. Published by University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1994)

Thousands of devout Roman Catholic believers visit the Basilica of Guadalupe where Juan Diego’s *tilma* hangs. Some come walking from hundreds of miles away in Mexico, some come on their knees from miles away, showing a devotion similar to believers who practice extreme forms of self-abnegation up to self-flagellation. Many of those who come to the basilica come to give thanks for miracles they attribute to the intervention of the Virgin.

This faith is so strongly imbedded in Roman Catholic belief that Juan Diego, a legendary figure, not a historical one, has been declared a saint. The closest we have to a contemporaneous account of Juan Diego’s experience is the Nican Mopohua, a sixteenth century Nahuatl account of the story of Juan Diego and the image of Guadalupe. (Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. "Nican Mopohua" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1500 - 1600.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/ed672de0-934d-0131-b36b-58d385a7b928>)

From a socio-anthropological perspective, it is important to look at Tonantzin, the Nahuatl name for “Our Mother” an ancient Mother Goddess. It is believed that the hill of Tepeyac where Juan Diego had his vision of/encounter with the Virgin was the

site of a temple to the ancient Mother Goddess. While some people say that the Nahuatl name for the mother Goddess sounds like Guadalupe phonetically, it is also said that Spanish soldiers were reminded of the Virgin of Guadalupe from Extremadura, Spain, and named her after their hometown Virgin. (Wikipedia. Tonantzin)

So these are the competing and inter-related aspects of the Virgin of Guadalupe: A belief in apparitions of the Virgin Mary, the domination and appropriation of indigenous culture and beliefs and values by the Spanish *Conquistadores*, a resurgence of indigenous (Aztec) spirituality in our time, and a fourth axis, Protestant versus Roman Catholic Christian beliefs and practices.

In the walk of Episcopalians down the Via Media, with a little bit of everything for everybody, a central question is whether or not the Virgin of Guadalupe is Mary or something else. Of course, according to official Roman Catholic doctrine the Virgin of Guadalupe is an apparition of the mother of Jesus, Mary. Thus it is Juan Diego who saw that apparition and took her message to the bishop who is declared a saint, not the Virgin of Guadalupe. She is an apparition, like other apparitions such as Our Lady of Medjugorje, Our Lady of Walsingham, Our Lady of Lourdes and Our Lady of Fatima. That doctrine does not stop people from believing in these apparitions as their divine intercessor and miracle-maker. A similar popular veneration of Jesus takes place at the crucifix of the Black Christ of Esquipulas in Guatemala, and in other locations in Latin America and many devout Christians have reported having visions of Jesus over time and around the world.

But most Protestant churches ridicule or anathematize these apparitions. The strongest opposition to the popular religious belief in apparitions as divine entities unto themselves are Protestants in the countries in which these apparitions are celebrated and adored. So Episcopal clergy in Mexico and in the Caribbean are adamantly opposed to the popular religious practice of celebrating the Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe. They are opposed to the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe because they believe that worshipping an apparition or a statue blurs the line between Roman Catholic theology and Episcopal Church theology. They do not approve of worshipping statues or apparitions for their own spiritual efficacy and feel like to allow this popular devotion in Episcopal Church is to deceive newcomers to the Episcopal Church into believing that our church is just like the Roman Catholic Church. They feel that this is an intolerable deception.

Some of this rejection of Guadalupe is a rejection of the Conquest. Some people see the story of Guadalupe as a cultural appropriation and tool of dominance by the Spaniards. After all the miracle of the Virgin's appearance to Juan Diego took place on an Aztec religious site. Juan Diego was a recently baptized Christian at a time when baptisms were often done under duress with Spanish soldiers forcing indigenous Mexicans to be baptized. The story of Guadalupe then served as a tool to spread the domination of Spain throughout Mexico. At some celebrations of Mary, the Virgin mother who appeared at Tepeyac, Aztec dancers sing and drum in front of her image, reasserting the almost lost Aztec spirituality in defiance of a religion imposed by the Spanish.

But there are other elements to the Guadalupe story which argue for it being a story of empowerment, rather than of domination. The Virgin addressed Juan Diego in Nahuatl, not in Spanish. Her face and skin seem to be brown, not white. Finally, she calls Juan Diego 'my little one' or "Juan Dieguito", the diminutive of his name, which expresses a special caring as of a mother for her child. Mary is no longer a Spanish import but is the mother of this indigenous peasant. Juan Diego did not go, or was unable to get in to see, the reigning Spanish bishop in Mexico City the first time that the Virgin sent him. But she sent him a second time bearing her miraculous sign of her portrait and roses that could not have been blooming in December. And after that second visit the mighty bishop came humbly following the indigenous peasant, Juan Diego, to do as he was told. This is the liberative story: the presence of God's mother among the poorest of the poor, a people being raped, enslaved and decimated by the forces of European conquest. This is the story that continues to empower believers across the American diaspora. "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." This is the promise of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the essential worker, to the undocumented, to those who are beaten down by white supremacy. This is the miracle of Salvation offered by Christ to each and every child of God.