

Our Lady of Guadalupe

Saint Paul Seminary and
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Early on the morning of December 9, 1531, the indigenous Mexican commoner Cuauhtlatoatzin ("eagle that speaks"), also known as Juan Diego, the baptismal name he had received at his conversion to Christianity several years prior, was journeying by foot to Tenochtitlan, modern-day Mexico City, to attend Mass and receive instruction in the Catholic faith. As he passed by the western slope of Tepeyac hill on the shores of Lake Texcoco, he suddenly heard the exquisite sound of other-worldly birdsong coming from the top of the hill. As he looked up in the direction of the rising sun, he heard the voice of someone calling him in his native Náhuatl language: "Dear Juan, dearest Juan Diego!" After climbing to the top of the little hill, he beheld a beautiful young woman whose "perfect grandeur exceeded all imagination," and whose clothing "was shining like the sun, as if it were sending out waves of light." As he prostrated himself to the ground, she invited him to come closer and said, "Know for sure, my dearest and youngest son, that I am truly

the perfect ever Virgin, Holy Mary, who has the honor to be the Mother of the one true God, by whom we all live, the Creator of people, the Lord of all around us and of what is close to us, the Lord of heaven and earth."

The beautiful Lady instructed Juan Diego to go to the Bishop of Mexico City, Fray Juan de Zumárraga, to ask that a chapel be built in that place, where she promised "to give God to all the people in all my personal love, Him that is my compassionate gaze, Him that is my help, Him that is my salvation. For truly I am honored to be your compassionate mother, yours and that of all the people that live together in this land, and also of all people of other various ancestries who love me, who cry out to me, who seek me, who trust in me. There I shall listen to their weeping, their sadness, in order to remedy, to cure all their various troubles, their miseries, their pains." After Juan Diego had made several visits to the bishop over the next few days and failed to convince him of what he had seen, the heavenly Lady

promised to give him a sign that would remove all doubt.

But when his uncle became gravely ill, on the morning of December 12, 1531, Juan Diego instead hurried past Tepeyac hill in the hopes of avoiding the Lady as he sought out a priest. She came down to meet him and reassured him: "Listen, put it into your heart, my youngest son, that what frightened you, what afflicted you is nothing. . . . Am I not here, I have the honor to be your mother? Are you not in my shadow and under my protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need anything more?" She sent him to the top of the hill to gather the flowers that he would find there. Though it was the dead of winter and Tepeyac was a dry and desolate place, Juan Diego found many kinds of beautiful flowers, like Castilian roses, which were in full bloom although it was not their season. He gathered them up in his *tilma*, a traditional indigenous cloak woven from

agave fibers, and after the Lady had arranged them herself, she sent him off to the bishop.

When he arrived at the bishop's residence, Juan Diego opened his *tilma* to allow the flowers to fall to the ground. As he did so, to the astonishment of Bishop Zumárraga and his attendants, there suddenly appeared upon Juan Diego's *tilma* the miraculous image of the Virgin Mary. In the meantime, the Lady had also appeared to Juan Diego's uncle and, after having cured him, identified herself as "[The Perfect Virgin, Holy Mary of Guadalupe](#)," the latter being a well-known Marian shrine in Spain, or perhaps a Spanish corruption of the original Náhuatl word "Coatlaxopeuh," which means "she who crushes the serpent."

The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, imprinted upon the *tilma* of Juan Diego in a manner that modern science has yet to explain, miraculously endures to this day at her shrine in Mexico City, in spite of centuries of exposure to the elements, an accident with

corrosive chemicals, and even a terrorist bombing in 1921. It serves as a prime example of the inculturation of the Gospel through the communication of the Christian faith in a manner immediately understandable to the native peoples of Mesoamerica. The composition of the image recalls the biblical vision of the Book of Revelation, "And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet" (12:1). She is clothed in a mantle of stars emblazoned over a sky of rich turquoise—a color reserved to Aztec emperors—and stands in front of the sun and above the moon, indicating her superiority to the Aztec gods.

While thus revealing herself to be a heavenly queen, she also points to One greater than herself. Her head is bowed, with eyes downcast and hands clasped, a prayerful gesture familiar to the Spanish. At the same time, she stands with her weight on one foot and the other knee bent in a posture of dance, which for the native peoples was the highest

expression of prayer. The dark ribbon tied high upon her waist signaled to the indigenous Mexicans that she was with child, and the four-petaled jasmine flower on her tunic positioned directly over her womb indicates that this Child is *Ometéotl*, the one true God. As one with Child, she shows particular concern for the unborn.

In the ultimate sign of peace and reconciliation between the various cultures that met in the New World, the Virgin's facial features are neither those of a Spaniard nor those of a native Mexican, but of a *mestiza*—a person of mixed European and indigenous ancestry. As Pope St. John Paul II once observed, "America, which historically has been, and still is, a melting-pot of peoples, has recognized in the *mestiza* face of the Virgin of Tepeyac, in Blessed Mary of Guadalupe, an impressive example of a perfectly inculturated evangelization. Consequently, not only in Central and South America, but in North America as well, the Virgin of Guadalupe is

venerated as Queen of all America" (*Ecclesia in America* §11). The presence of Our Lady of Guadalupe in this Grotto is therefore intended as a reminder of her maternal love and tenderness toward all the members of the St. Thomas community, and an expression of her desire to lead all people to her divine Son, Jesus Christ.