



The Woman Who Changed the Face of a Hemisphere



Msgr. Eduardo Chávez Ph.D.



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The Christian Hemisphere

Carl A. Anderson
Supreme Knight

Our Lady of Guadalupe's patronage of churches and families throughout the hemisphere goes back 475 years, yet her message today is as timely as it was in 1531. Although during these five centuries she has come to symbolize many things, as Pope John Paul II noted in *Ecclesia in America*, hers is ultimately a message of unity, for she is a spiritual mother we all share.

In *Ecclesia in America* Pope John Paul II noted that "Throughout the continent, from the time of the first evangelization, the presence of the Mother of God has been strongly felt, thanks to the efforts of the missionaries. In their preaching, 'the Gospel was proclaimed by presenting the Virgin Mary as its highest realization. From the beginning — invoked as Our Lady of Guadalupe — Mary, by her motherly and merciful figure, was a great sign of the closeness of the Father and of Jesus Christ, with whom she invites us to enter into communion. ...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."

He also wrote, "the renewal of the Church in America will not be possible without the active presence of the laity. Therefore, they are largely responsible for the future of the Church."

The question is what can Catholics, all the baptized — lay and clergy alike — do to advance the promise of *Ecclesia in America*—a promise based upon the reality that our unity in the sacramental life of the Church transcends every border.

All of us in the Americas can claim Our Lady Guadalupe as our mother. More of us in this hemisphere, than anywhere else on earth, can claim the common bond of Catholic faith.

Seeking to further forge that bond of spiritual unity, and united under the mantle and message of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Knights of Columbus has been active in the United States since 1882, in Canada since 1897, in Mexico since 1905, in Cuba and Panama since 1909, in Puerto Rico since 1911, in Guatemala since 1967 and in the Dominican Republic since 1979. The fraternal charity of the Knights has fostered cooperation among Catholics throughout the hemisphere for more than a century. That cooperation has taken many different forms and increasing such cooperation is a high priority of the Knights of Columbus, as it should be for other Catholic organizations in the United States.

We invite you to join the largest lay Catholic organization in the world, which offers to families the opportunity to live their vocation to holiness. We are committed to spread Our Lady's message which guides us always closer to her Son, Jesus Christ.

The Woman Who Changed the Face of a Hemisphere

Msgr. Eduardo Chávez, Ph.D.

The well-remembered Servant of God, John Paul II, declared: “The appearance of Mary to the native Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac in 1531 had a decisive effect on evangelization. Its influence greatly overflows the boundaries of Mexico, spreading throughout the whole Continent.”¹ Moreover, the Holy Father proclaimed very explicitly: “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.”²



Pope Benedict XVI before a statue of St. Juan Diego, who is showing his “tilma” with the image of the Virgin to Bishop Juan de Zumárraga.

What did John Paul II see that made him proclaim the liturgical feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe for the entire American continent? What is it in this devotion that prompted Pope Benedict XVI, a few short days after he started his pontificate, to explicitly affirm before the Virgin of Guadalupe of Tepeyac: “We entrust our lives in your hands?” Why is this devotion loved in such evident ways by all Popes, and why is it that since 1573 until today, indulgences, privileges and blessings have been granted to the humble shrine in Tepeyac? And why do millions of people, not only from Mexico, but from everywhere, find in her a message that is explicitly personal, that touches their hearts, converts them and

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in America*, México, January 22th, 1999 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999) 20. The Holy Father quotes literally the *IV Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano*. Santo Domingo a 12 de octubre de 1992, 24. Look also in AAS, 85 (1993) p. 826.

² JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in America*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999) 20.

rekindles their faith, fills them with hope, and makes them fall in love with the immense love of God?

Just as with any salvation event, the *Guadalupano* is a well-recorded moment in history. It happened 475 years ago, and in a specific place: the hill of Tepeyac. It transcends frontiers, cultures, peoples and customs; it touches the deepest sense of the human being. Moreover, it takes into account the participation of each human being, concrete and historical, with his or her defects and virtues, so that the intervention can reach beyond what human nature would allow. One of the clearest manifestations that the Guadalupano is in fact a salvation event is the conversion of hearts, its ability to move and direct lives toward the only one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, Jesus Christ, our Lord. In this event, God has taken the initiative to meet with the human being in a predetermined historical moment. This historical aspect is important when it comes to making a reality of a complete and total change of life, in order to create a culture of life and a civilization of love from the root itself.

God intervenes by means of his own Mother, Our Lady of Guadalupe, who is sent by the Father, through the Holy Spirit, to manifest her Son, Jesus Christ, and to allow every human being to become a participating part of Him. She is the first disciple and missionary who manifests and delivers to us the message of salvation. At the same time, she forms disciples and missionaries who can bear witness, at the expense of their own lives, to their immense joy upon encountering the love of Jesus Christ through his Mother and our Mother.



St. Juan Diego before
the Virgin of Guadalupe.

It is a real and true story, just as the love of God is real and true. The Guadalupan event is part of the history of salvation, which has a decisive influence upon the evangelization of the whole continent, just as the Holy Father affirmed. Our Lady of Guadalupe is the Star of Evangelization, "perfectly inculturated," a role model for the entire world.

The *Acontecimiento Guadalupano*
(Guadalupan Event), centered in Jesus Christ, our

Lord, consists of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe to an Indian named Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin (which means: *Eagle able to speak*), which took place between December 9 and 12, 1531, on the hill or Tepeyac north of Mexico City.



**Human sacrifice:
Offering of the heart and
blood to the sun god.**

Ten years earlier, after the *Conquista* (the Conquest of the Aztec empire by the Spanish) of 1521 had taken place, the natives' religious rituals were done away with, including the human sacrifices they offered in an attempt to feed the gods so that the life cycle could continue. Now that the gods were no longer being fed, the natives were afraid that a cataclysm was imminent. However, before their incredulous eyes there was no change in the cosmos: the sun continued to rise, the stars and the moon were still there, occupying their place, day and night, and the cycles of the seasons continued. What had taken place? Had the gods lied to them? Had everything been a mockery against those who considered themselves to be sons of the sun? What had happened to their prophecies and their hopes? Where were their gods now? Was this a strategy of those demanding beings?

The defeat experienced in the *Conquista* was not only a military one. It also resulted in an economic depression and a moral, spiritual, cultural and religious collapse. It was a clear desertion of those gods in whom all the natives had believed and to whom they had given the hearts and the blood of their children. For what purpose? For nothing, absolutely for nothing! An empire was dying.

The trauma of the *Conquista* inevitably persisted among the natives. An expert in the Náhuatl (Aztec) culture, Miguel Leon-Portilla, tells us: "Those who were considered invincible, the peoples of the sun, the most powerful of their time in history had to accept the defeat. Once the gods were dead and the government lost, with its control, fame and glory, the experience of the Conquest meant something more than a tragedy; it remained nailed to the soul and its memory turned into trauma."³ The sad and somber echoes of the *Canto Mexicano* (Mexican Song) resonated in the Anáhuac desert.

³ LEÓN-PORTILLA, MIGUEL. *El reverso de la conquista* [México ²: Joaquín Mortiz, 1970]21-22.

The crying expands, the tears drop there in the Tlatelolco.

The Mexicans have already left by way of the waters;

They look like women; the escape is general

Where are we going? Oh my friends! Was it true?

Mexico City is being abandoned.

The smoke is rising; the fog is expanding

[...] Cry my friends

Understand that because of these events

We have lost the Mexican nation

The water and the food have turned sour

This is what the Giver of life in Tlatelolco has done...



The conquest of Tenochtitlan

A small group of Franciscan missionaries had to face an enormous challenge among millions of natives that had comprised the Aztec empire. These saintly men had to do something to keep the Indians alive and at the same time they needed to evangelize them. There is little doubt that during the first evangelizing effort in Mexico, the work of the missionaries was extraordinary⁴; however, the task was more than they could handle.

Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta wrote about the missionaries' concern, from the beginning of the evangelization, with being able to detach the natives from their gods. The missionaries kept trying in a thousand different ways to make themselves understood, but "...neither the Indians understood what was being said in Latin nor could their idolatry be stopped, and the priests could not admonish them or implement ways to stop them because they did not know their language. And they felt distraught and afflicted because of this."⁵ Undoubtedly, they were worried. How can you evangelize millions of natives while involved in a dramatic conquest with only a few missionaries, who at that time amounted to no more than thirty? Moreover, their potential converts were decimated by a terrible disease, smallpox, which broke out shortly after the

⁴ Cfr. FRAY GERÓNIMO DE MENDIETA, *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana* (México: Porrúa [Col. Biblioteca Porrúa N° 46, 1980]). Also: FRAY TORIBIO MOTOLINIA, *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España* (México: Porrúa [Col. "Sepan cuantos..." N° 129], 1973). Also: FRAY BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN, *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* (México5: Porrúa [Col. "Sepan cuantos..." N° 300, 1982]).

⁵ FRAY GERÓNIMO DE MENDIETA, *Historia Eclesiástica*, p. 219.

arrival of the Europeans and killed half of the indigenous population, while the these same people were also experiencing a dramatic trauma because of the death of their gods.

The friars were indeed very worried because while they were trying to defend the Indians from the mistreatment by the Spaniards, they were also trying to stop arrogance, hatred, and greed from destroying the Spanish community itself. The *Primera Audiencia* (First Audience), a civil governmental agency at the time, was a most corrupt institution. Thefts, violations, and unjust behavior plagued and seriously affected both the natives and some of the Spaniards who were trying to correct the situation. The Spanish missionaries suffered atrocities at the hands of their Catholic compatriots, who allowed their hearts to be tempted by incredible cruelty, even to the point of attempting to murder the bishop of Mexico City, Fray Juan de Zumárraga. The bishop was forced to excommunicate the members of the First Audience, damaging their reputation in México City. It was truly such an intensely complex time that Bishop Zumárraga wrote to the king while imploring God's help: "If God does not intervene to provide an instant remedy, this land is on the verge of being lost forever..."



Fray Juan de Zumárraga,
first bishop of Mexico.



St. Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin
("Speaking Eagle")

And God intervened through the being He loves the most, His own Mother, who chooses a simple and humble Indian to be her faithful messenger, her completely trustworthy intercessor: Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin.

Juan Diego was born in the town of Cuautitlan around 1474. He was a *macehual*; that is to say, a common man who had experienced personally the Conquest by the Spaniards and the Indian tribes who decided to ally themselves with the Europeans to defeat the Mexican Empire. In 1524, with the arrival in Mexico of the first Franciscan missionaries, Juan Diego embraced the Christian faith and was baptized

along with his wife Maria Lucia and his uncle Juan Bernardino. Together they decided to move to the town of Tlupatepec. Maria Lucia passed away in 1529.

On Saturday, December 9, 1531, Juan Diego was on his way to Tlatelolco to attend catechism when the Mother of God appeared to him. She asked him to be her messenger so that a sacred little house, a temple, could be built in the valley of Tepeyac where she could offer there all her love in the form of her Son, Jesus Christ. She said this needed to be approved by the bishop, Fray Juan de Zumárraga.



St. Juan Diego before Zumárraga

Juan Diego displayed great strength and patience before the ensuing difficulties and contradictions. At one point, the bishop asked for a sign and the Virgin Mary asked Juan Diego to go back to Tepeyac so that she could give him the sign that had been requested.



St. Juan Diego being stopped by the Virgin of Guadalupe

However, Juan Diego could not keep the appointment because he had to take care of his uncle, who was gravely ill.

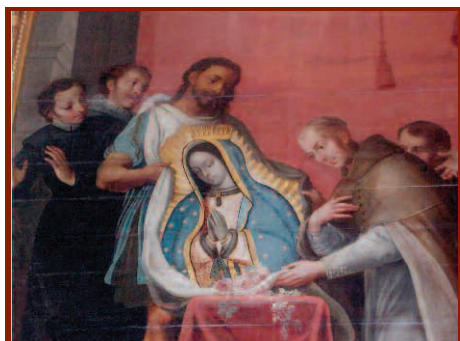
On that day, Tuesday, December 12, he left in a hurry, very early, to go to Tlatelolco to get a priest to take care of his uncle Juan Bernardino.



The Virgin visiting St. Juan Diego's uncle, Juan Bernardino, whom she brings back to health and to whom she reveals her name: "Santa María de Guadalupe."

Very distressed, he sought to avoid his meeting with the Virgin, going around the hill of Tepeyac, planning in that way to avoid any delays. But it was then that the Virgin of Guadalupe stopped him to tell him the most beautiful words, words that were also meant for us: "Listen, put it in your heart. My Son, the youngest, whatever

made you afraid and afflicted you, it is no longer; do not allow your face and your heart to be upset; do not be afraid of this illness or of any other illness, or of anything poignant and afflicting. Am I not here, I who am your mother? Aren't you under my shadow and my protection? Am I not the source of your happiness? Aren't you in the hollow of my robe and the crossing of my arms? Is there anything else you need?" The Lady from Heaven assured him that his uncle Juan Bernardino was already cured. Precisely at that moment, the Virgin appeared before the dying uncle and not only gave him back his health but disclosed her name: "Santa Maria de Guadalupe." ("Guadalupe" is a name of Arabic origin that means "the river bed", "the one that carries the water"; it can also be translated as "river of light." She takes us to the living water.) Since 1675, some historians have suggested that Juan Bernardino had heard an Indian name rather than the name Guadalupe, but this is totally untrue as it is also not true that the Spaniards had named her Guadalupe. It was the Virgin herself who chose to call herself "Santa María de Guadalupe."



St. Juan Diego shows the flowers to bishop Zumárraga and in that very moment the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared on his "tilma."

Juan Diego had the faith and the hope to accept what the Virgin told him and made himself available to bring to the bishop the sign he had requested. The Virgin asked him to go to the top of the hill, where he would find beautiful flowers to cut and put in his *tilma* (cloak). Just as she said, Juan Diego found on that dry and rocky hilltop, a place of death, the most beautiful and extraordinary flowers. He did as

he was told, and came down from the top of the hill bringing inside his *tilma* the precious sign that the bishop had requested. The Virgin arranged each one of the flowers in the Indian's *tilma* and sent him straight to Mexico City to deliver the promised sign to the bishop.

After much patience, Juan Diego found himself before the bishop to give him the sign. For the Indian, the contents of his *tilma* was very eloquent because,



St. Juan Diego's "tilma" showing the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

according to the native understanding, the truth is “*flor y canto*” (flower and song). He was bringing flowers from that place, the Tepeyac, where he heard the marvelous bird songs. The Indian was delivering the truth in his *tilma*, much to everybody’s surprise. When Juan Diego opened his *tilma* with the flowers, at that moment, the beautiful image of Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared on it. It was a surprise for the bishop and for all those who were there observing the development of this wonder. It was a surprise for Juan Diego, because the printed image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in his *tilma* meant that he himself, the humble and simple Indian, had turned into the sign itself. It was his *tilma* and now he himself, his total person, was in the hands of the bishop, head of his Church. His very person was turning into the sign of the divine presence in the hands of the bishop.

This event spoke of the immense love of God and let both the Spaniards and the Indians know how they could come to understand the real truth of the One for whom we live, the Giver of life, the Owner of the heavens and earth who came to save the human being from sin and death, from desperation and hate, from violence and injustice.

The image on the *tilma* shows the Virgin Mother as a *mestiza* (a woman of mixed race), wrapped in the sun with the moon at her feet, her robe studded with stars. Her message and will is the spreading of the love of God and that is why she asked for a temple, to offer His love to persons of every lineage who trust in Her.



Representation of the Indian wedding depicting the knot made with the bride’s “*huipil*” and the groom’s “*tilma*.”

In this salvation event, unity, harmony, and God’s intervention are manifested in an evangelization executed through His own Mother, Mary, for a true conversion as described in the Gospel of St. John. During the Wedding at Cana, Mary, Mother of God, gives human beings her only commandment: “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5). Up until now, the Guadalupean event has been an unparalleled example of what the Servant of God, beloved John Paul II, called “the model of evangelization perfectly inculturated.”

But there is something else. The appearance of the blessed image on the humble tilma of Juan Diego has several meanings. These four are the most essential ones:

- The *tilma* was used as cover for protection against inclement weather.
- It was used to carry things, thus contributed to the support of the family.
- The *tilma* within the Indian society was an indication of the status and social condition of a person. Only noblemen could have their garments decorated.
- And, lastly, the *tilma* was so important that during Indian weddings the man's tilma was tied into a knot with the huipil, the woman's dress, as a symbol that their lives were united.



When the Virgin of Guadalupe printed her image on the humble tilma, she herself, with her own image, decorated and dignified the human being. It is she who goes through a spiritual wedding with the people. It is she who is our protection. Let us remember what she tells Juan Diego, and through him all of us: "Don't be afraid. Am I not here, I who am your mother?" And, it is she who will give us sustenance, her own Son Jesus Christ, who delivers himself in a very special way during the Eucharist. Jesus Christ, our Lord, is the center of the *Guadalupan event*. He is the one who gives us sustenance

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Image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the center of her abdomen there is a four-petaled flower representing God Almighty. Her dress also has flowers that represent the civilization of the truth of the Love of God. To the side, there is a representation of a hill within a codex.

with his body and his blood and for this reason the Immaculate Virgin of Guadalupe wants a temple to offer all her love, which is her own Son, Jesus Christ. Thus, the center of her message and her image is not her; it is all about her Son. She shows herself as the immaculate tabernacle of God.

In this image, we can observe that everything about Our Lady of Guadalupe is a code that the Indians understood perfectly. The image reveals a pregnant young woman, the Mother Virgin, with a tunic that represents the earth and a blue robe that represents the heavens. In her, there is harmony among all the stars because she is wrapped in the sun, her robe is studded with stars and she is stepping on the moon. In the center of her abdomen there is a four-petalled flower that means God owns heaven and earth, the omnipotent and omnipresent God. The flowers around her are rooted in the blue robe that signifies the heavens; therefore, they are flowers rooted in God, in the Divine. These strange flowers are made up of two graphic elements, the hill and the river. To the Indians this binomial meant "civilization." In the flower-hill section there are a number of small flowers—thus a flower hill, full of the truth of God. When accompanied by water, it means the truth of God which results in a new civilization of love, in unity and in harmony.

Shortly after the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, conversions began occurring at an astounding rate. The missionaries could not believe what they were witnessing; they were startled and overwhelmed. The Indians were coming from everywhere, from far away lands asking for the sacraments. Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta said: "As they were being baptized, many of them received the sacrament with tears in their eyes. Who would dare say that they came without faith? It was hard for them to come from such far away places when no one was compelling them to do so to receive the sacrament of baptism. In 1539, only eight years after the apparition, almost nine million Indians had converted. As far as

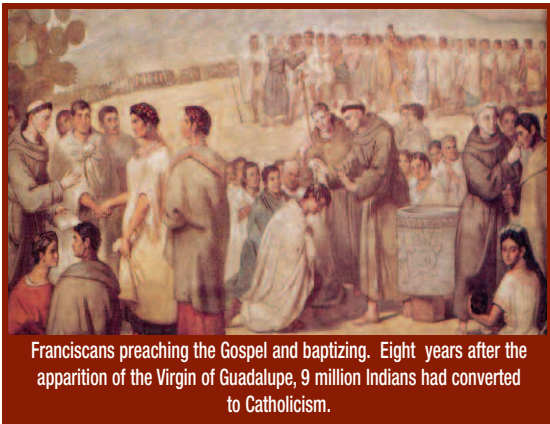


A Franciscan baptizing an Indian.

the Spaniards were concerned, the rate of their conversion was astounding. There are many documents that describe how the enormous devotion of the missionaries prompted the Indians to come en masse to see the blessed image.

Although almost five centuries have gone by since the Guadalupan Event, today it is revealed to us as something marvelously new. The message of Guadalupe is perfectly adequate to meet the needs of our times and the search for peace, so that all men can better themselves in harmony, sharing the wealth of the cultures of their ancestors.

Because of this, it is necessary to reiterate the importance of the Guadalupan Event when it comes to the evangelization of an entire continent and beyond. This event spreads a living Gospel to a world so much in need of unity, peace, solidarity and love, a true conversion. Because of a simple, humble man of good will, who was full of love for the God whom Mary brought to us, wonderful things can move forward in favor of a new humanity, bonded together in a civilization of love.



⁶ FRAY GERÓNIMO DE MENDIETA, *Historia Eclesiástica*, p. 276.

Prayer to the Virgin of Guadalupe

Blessed Virgin of Guadalupe, Mother of the true God for whom we live, bearer of Jesus Christ who gives us His Spirit and gives life to the Church,

We thank you because you are our loving and compassionate Mother; because you hear our weeping, our sorrow; because you are the remedy and the cure for our grief, our misery and our pain.

Thank you, Mother, for placing us in your heart, for allowing us to be under your shadow and your protection, for being the source of our joy and for keeping us in the hollow of your robe and the crossing of your arms.

Thank you, Our Mother, because we have learned this message through your humble son St. Juan Diego and through his intercession we ask that you fortify us in Peace, in Unity and in Love.

AMEN.

Father Eduardo Chávez

Notes

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The lay person should learn especially how to perform the mission of Christ and the Church by basing his life on belief in the divine mystery of creation and redemption and by being sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit who gives life to the people of God and who urges all to love God the Father as well as the world and men in Him. ... In addition to spiritual formation, a solid doctrinal instruction in theology, ethics, and philosophy adjusted to differences of age, status, and natural talents, is required.

-The Second Vatican Council (AA 29)

About the Knights of Columbus

The Knights of Columbus, a fraternal benefit society founded in 1882 in New Haven, Connecticut by Servant of God Father Michael J. McGivney, is the world's largest lay Catholic organization, with more than 1.7 million members in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. The Knights support each other and their community, contributing millions of volunteer hours to charitable causes each year. The Knights were the first to financially support the families of law enforcement and fire department personnel killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and work closely with Catholic bishops in Canada, Mexico, Poland and the United States to protect innocent human life and traditional marriage. To find out more about the Knights of Columbus, visit our website, www.kofc.org.

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