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Our Lady of Guadalupe

A New Interpretation
of the Story, Apparitions,
and Image

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Prologue

Almost five centuries ago it happened, on December 12, 1531, in the heart of the ancient city of México-Tenochtitlan. In the presence of Bishop-elect Fray Juan de Zumárraga, an image of the Virgin Mary was imprinted on the cloak (*tilma*) of Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin. That event, which seemed confined to a small area in Mexico, was to have vast and profound consequences for the entire American continent. Pope John Paul II recognized this when he named the Blessed Virgin Mary patroness of all America and canonized Juan Diego.

Why is this event still so important?

We are fortunate to have a written account of the events of December 12, 1531, in a work titled *Nican Mopohua* by Antonio Valeriano. The title *Nican Mopohua* comes from the work's first two Aztec words, which mean "here is told, is set down in order." It's not easy for us to grasp what it meant for those who experienced the apparitions, but a new translation can help understand their implications for us today.

What follows is a recent translation of the *Nican Mopohua* accompanied by commentary that will enable us to understand and live the message of our Mother of Guadalupe.





Nican Mopohua

“Here is told,
is set down in order..”

Introduction

Here is told, is set down in order, how in a marvelous way the love of the Holy Virgin Mary, our Queen and the Mother of God, became visible there on Tepeyac, known today as Guadalupe.

At the first, she graciously permitted a humble Indian, Juan Diego, to see her, and in the end, in the presence of the recently appointed Bishop Don Fray Juan de Zumárraga, her love gave us her precious and beloved image.

Background

Ten years after the conquest of the city of Mexico, when arrows and shields were laid down, when everywhere on the mountains and the waters there was peace, there sprouted forth first the branch, then the blossoms. There came the truth, the knowledge of the One who is the source of all life: the true God.

The text begins by saying “when arrows and shields were laid down, when everywhere on the mountains and the waters there was peace.” For the inhabitants of Mexico, war had been both their life and their religion. This was especially so for the Aztecs, who believed that through warfare they collaborated with their supreme deity, supplying human

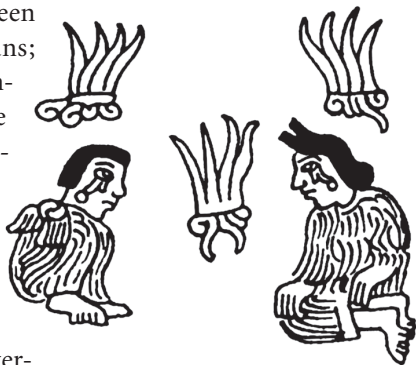




blood and hearts to maintain the harmony of the universe. The idea that the universe could go on as before even though war had ended stripped the Aztecs of their very reason for existence and made them question the validity of everything they had previously done and believed. Thus, peace “on the mountains and the waters” was not something pleasant. It was just the opposite: the peace of a graveyard.

Moreover, Mexico City, which had dominated all the other cities, had been successfully conquered and destroyed. The battle for the city had not only been a fight between

Spaniards and American Indians; it also pitted Indians against Indians, both for and against the Spaniards. In fact, the *conquistadores*—the conquerors—could have done nothing without their Indian allies. Thus, in one sense, the Indians were the true conquistadores. The Aztecs had been defeated and almost exter-



minated. The others were victors for at least a short time; however, their victories did not bring them glory, pride, or satisfaction. Rather, the victory of the combined Spanish and Indian force left the Indian “losers” thinking their whole culture and religion were useless. It seemed everything they had known and loved was condemned by God, and they had to forsake it all.

To properly appreciate the interpretation of the Guadalupe event, readers of *Nican Mopohua* must understand the author’s use of botanical verbs such as *sprout* and *blossom* to express faith in “the truth, the knowledge of the One who is the source of all life: the true God.” Metaphors from the plant kingdom expressed the highest human values for the indigenous; for them, “truth” was *nelliliztli*, meaning “rootedness” or “to take root.” Only that which had a strong root was





true. Although the root is the base, support, and foundation of every good plant, it cannot be seen because it is buried in the earth. A beautiful flower is a witness to a plant's good and healthy root as well as a promise of its ability to bear good fruit.

It happened, then, in the year 1531, in a few days in the month of December, that there was a poor but honorable Indian gentleman named Juan Diego. It was said he owned houses in Cuautitlán, which belongs to the parish of Tlaltelolco.

It was exactly “in the year 1531.” Indigenous people believed the date of a birth or of the beginning of some sort of program indicated that God is at work. The day on which the Blessed Mother left us her image, even though designated as December 12, 1531, was really December 22 because the European calendar was off by ten days. With the arrival of the winter solstice on December 21/22, the days gain more sunlight and begin to overcome darkness. The occurrence of the Guadalupe event thus had more importance for men and women who considered themselves the “People of the Sun.” Moreover, the year 1531 was the turn of the century, from the fourth Mexican century to the fifth. (A Mexican century was equal to 104 European years. Mexican history begins in the year 1115, when Aztecs were supposed to have left Aztlán, their mythical place of origin.) In a culture that paid attention to numbers, the year 1531 was significant.

Cuautitlán, where Juan Diego owned houses, was not part of México-Tenochtitlan, and the inhabitants of Cuautitlán had joined with the





Spaniards to fight the Aztecs. Thus, Juan Diego was not a conquered person, but a conqueror. Cuautitlán is rather far from Tlaltelolco. The text does not say Juan Diego *lived* in Cuautitlán at that time, only that he had houses there. Thus it is possible that he customarily lived in Tlupetlac. Nor does the text say Juan Diego was a poor man, contrary to popular opinion. It is more correct to present him as an Indian gentleman, a poor but worthy man, as so many of our indigenous brothers and sisters continue to be.

Juan Diego is described as a good Indian, which meant he possessed a solid Christian foundation. From their childhood, all Indians were taught by the missionaries to believe God loved them and that they had to respond to that love.¹





First Apparition

It was Saturday, very early in the morning, when he went in search of the knowledge of God and of His commandments. As he drew near to the hill called Tepeyac, day was just dawning. He heard singing on the hill above, like the song of numerous fine song birds. When their voices

fell silent, it seemed like the hill itself answered them, in a most gentle and pleasing way; their songs surpassed those of the coyoltótl bird and of the tzinitzcan bird and of other fine song birds.



The event begins as dawn is breaking; night is giving way to a new day. In the worldview of native peoples, the night was the origin of all that is great and good rather than something fearful. Juan Diego was not on his way to Sunday Mass,

but to the Saturday Mass in honor of Our Lady. When, over a century later in 1666, a formal hearing was convened to ascertain the truth of all that had taken place, the witnesses affirmed that “they called Juan



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