

The Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe

The more than 450-year-old Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is more than simply a picture. It contains symbols - in a sense, hieroglyphics, or a story in pictures - that reveal part of the message the Blessed Mother brought through Juan Diego to the Natives of Mexico and to all the people of the Americas. But the symbols had a special meaning to the Natives, who because of their culture could decipher the code in the image.



The Image of Guadalupe has great significance for those who can decipher the symbols.

1) THE EYES

The eyes of the Image are looking down, a position of humility, revealing that, as great as she is, she is not a god. Native gods never looked down; they looked straight ahead.

2) THE FACE

The woman's face shows great compassion. The Natives felt that the face was the window of the inner person, a means by which one could read who a person was - the way a person would act. A good woman to the Natives was one whose femininity showed in her face. The head of the woman in the Image shows her with dark skin and dark hair like that of the Natives.

3) THE HANDS

Her hands are not poised in the traditional Western style of prayer, but in an indigenous manner of listening, indicating that help is being offered, that something is to come from her.

4) THE MATERNITY BAND

The maternity band around the woman's waist is the sign of a pregnant woman, a mother who is about to give birth, it was a sign to the Natives that someone is yet to come.

5) THE FOUR-PETAL FLOWER

The four-petal flower on her womb is the symbol of a new era; of a new being. This being is Jesus.

6) THE STARS

The position of the stars in the mantle gives the exact time and day of the apparition marked by the constellations above Mexico City's sky on that moment.

7) THE SUN RAYS

The rays of the sun in the Image recalled for the Natives that the sun played a key role in their civilization. But the woman in the Image is greater than even the sun. She hides the sun but does not extinguish it.

The Image...

Page 2.

8) THE MANTLE

The predominant color in the Image's mantle is turquoise, the blue-green color reserved for the great god Omecihuatl. Although the Natives had many "intermediary gods." Omecihuatl was considered the supreme god, a mother-father god who sometimes was represented as a man and sometimes as a woman. It was a source of unity for everything that exists.

represented the gods instead through music, singing, and other arts. Artists, they felt, had hearts that carried something of the divine, that made god visible to the world.

Something Special

9) THE MOON

The woman is standing on the moon, indicating that she has overcome evil, expressed by a black moon.

So when Juan Diego heard the beautiful music he knew he was in the presence of something special. He asked himself: "How can I be worthy of what I am hearing?"

10) THE ANGEL

The "angel" at the bottom of the Image was seen by the Natives as an "intermediary god" carrying in a new era, the beginning of a new civilization. One era was at an end - had died - and a new one was beginning, was being born.

Soon he heard a voice calling to him: "*Juantzin, Juan Diegotzin.*"

By using this ending (-tzin) our Lady restores dignity to the poor Natives recognizing that he is worthy of respect.

The Story

The story of Our Lady of Guadalupe begins in the early morning of December 9, 1531, while a Native named Juan Diego was on his way to Mass and to continue his studies of the Christian faith.

Juan Diego walked up the hill to see who was calling his name and when he arrived to the top he saw our Lady just standing there. The fact that she was standing was a sign of simple nobleness. Addressing the people sitting down was an indication of control and superiority over the Natives.

When he reached the top of a hill called Tepeyac he suddenly heard the strains of beautiful music. Juan Diego thought at first that he had gone to heaven or was in some kind of paradise, because to him, as to other Natives of Mexico, music was a symbol of the divine, of the gods. The Natives felt that words alone could not adequately communicate the concept of god, so they

She asked where he was going and he told her he was going to church. Our Lady then told him that she desired a temple so she could give us her love, compassion, help and defense. She continued to tell him that she was the "Holy Mary, Ever Virgin Mother of the True God...a merciful Mother to all...I listen to their sufferings."

The Story...

She told him to go to the palace of the bishop of Mexico and tell him that she wanted a temple built there in the valley.

Juan Diego then went to see Fray Juan de Zumarraga, a Franciscan and bishop of Mexico. After much waiting, he finally was able to see the bishop, and told him of the Blessed Mother's desire.

The bishop, however, did not believe Juan's story at that time, and asked him to return a few days later, after he had had time to study the matter—and to investigate Juan.

Frustrated

Juan felt frustrated, and made his way back to the hill of Tepeyac, never doubting that he would see Our Lady again.

When he saw her, he told her that the bishop had not believed him, but Our Lady again told Juan to return to the bishop to tell him again of her desire. Juan promised that he would, and the next day, December 10th, after Mass, he again went to see the bishop. Again, after much difficulty, he eventually succeeded in getting to the bishop, repeating the message from Our Lady.

This time the bishop was more inclined to trust Juan, but nevertheless told him that he would have to bring some sign that the woman he had seen was the Blessed Mother.

Juan returned to the hill of Tepeyac, where he told the Virgin of the bishop's request.

A Sign

Our Lady told him to return the next day and he would receive his sign. But the next day, December 11, Juan had to care for his dying uncle, Juan Bernardino, who near day's end asked him to get a priest so that he could go to Confession and receive the Last Sacraments.

Very early the following day, December 12, Juan set out to get a priest, but tried to avoid the hilltop of Tepeyac because he was ashamed at not having returned to the spot the previous day as Our Lady had told him. But as he was taking a roundabout route Our Lady came down from the top of the hill and again asked him where he was going.

Juan told her of his uncle's illness and that he had felt the need to care for him. Our Lady assured him that his uncle would not die, and Juan renewed his offer to go to the bishop with any sign she would give.

Flowers

Our Lady instructed him to go to the top of the hill, where she first appeared to him and, there he will find a variety of flowers in full bloom. She told him to gather the flowers and bring them to her. When he reached the summit he was surprised to see all the flowers, since they were out of season and everything was frozen.

He picked the flowers, placed them in his *tilma*, or cloak, and brought them to her.

Our Lady then told Juan to take them to the bishop as a sign.

Juan did, and when he was with

the bishop he repeated Our Lady's message and said he had brought a sign. He then unfolded his *tilma*, and the roses came tumbling out.

The bishop, seemingly overwhelmed by something even greater than the miracle of the roses, got up from his throne, knelt before Juan, and began praying.

The Image

Juan, in wonderment, then looked down at his *tilma*, and saw there the Image of the Blessed Virgin, exactly as she appeared to him on the hill of Tepeyac.

A shrine of adobe was then erected at that sight, in time for Christmas.

A number of churches have held the famed Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe throughout the four centuries since the apparition.

In 1976 a huge new shrine was dedicated to her near the site where Juan Diego first saw her. Since that time she has been proclaimed the Empress of the Americas—a patron for everyone—because when she appeared there were no national boundaries, as we know them today, separating countries in this hemisphere.



*"I listen to their lamentations and solace
all their sorrows
and their sufferings"*

THE MESSAGE

Page 5.

The appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico more than 450 years ago was not an isolated event intended only for the Natives, the Mexicans, or the Mexican-Americans but for all. She is just as important today as she was centuries ago, and she is important for everyone, for she has been designated the patroness of all the Americas. When she appeared to the Native Juan Diego in December 1531 there were no national boundaries, as we know them today, in this Hemisphere. The Rio Grande River, for example, was only a stream, and was not a boundary separating the United States and Mexico.

A NEW ERA

When Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared on the hill of Tepeyac she heralded the beginning of a new era. A new civilization that would rise out of the ashes of the Indigenous civilization that had been destroyed by the Spanish conquerors. She gave birth to a new people—the Mexican people.

But her significance goes beyond that, because she is the patroness of all Americans. She also came to give birth to a renewed Christianity, through Juan Diego, the great lay apostle of Christianity in the Americas. She came to help us evangelize society.

Later, missionaries saw a relationship between Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Immaculate Conception, which is symbolic of the dignity of women. Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared as a young maiden, a virgin, a woman not violated, who resembled the Natives and who had not been violated by the Spaniards.

She also stands as a symbol of unity for all those struggling to leave a state of oppression to enter the state of being free human beings.

She is a mother, as she told Juan Diego, who is here to right the wrongs of her children, a mother who has heard the cry of her children and comes to remedy what is wrong, a mother who is with us in our struggle to liberate ourselves from sin and oppression.

The significance and importance of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe is derived especially from the period of time in which she appeared.

In the pre - Hispanic New World, the Natives had many gods, or "intermediary spirits,"

but there was one great spirit, or god beyond all the intermediary gods, named Omecihuatl.

That god whose special color was turquoise, the predominant color of Our Lady of Guadalupe's mantle, was considered the one, powerful creating force.

That god sometimes was being represented by a male figure and sometimes by a female figure.

Those figures were often referred to by different names, as Catholics refer to the Blessed Mother under various titles: Mother of Perpetual Help, Our Lady Seat of Wisdom, etc.

The female figure of the supreme god was also known as the "snake woman," a symbol of wisdom because the snake was a symbol of wisdom among the Natives. That symbol was also called "Tonantzin," and represented a respected, loving mother.

SACRED SITE

The hill of Tepeyac, where Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego, was a sacred site, a place of pilgrimage even before the Spaniards and Christianity came, Tonantzin was venerated there as the mother of gods, the source of life, as a god who gave meaning, direction, and guidance to all life.

The relatively easy conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards was, in a sense, made possible for them by the Natives themselves.

Native prophets had long been predicting the end of their civilization, the end of their era. In addition, many other Natives disliked the Aztecs and felt that they had corrupted their religion, but that the god Quetzacoatl would return or send an emissary to bring them liberation and salvation.

So when the Spaniards arrived under Hernando Cortes many Natives accepted the conquerors as liberators or saviors and allied themselves with the *conquistadores*.

The Message...

Page 6.

NOT LIBERATORS

But most Natives soon saw that the Spaniards were not the expected liberators of Quetzacoatl. They had no scruples in killing people — either in battle or simply to gain gold (one Native chronicler said that the Spaniards went after gold like “hungry pigs”).

In their conquest of the New World the Spaniards destroyed the temples of the Natives, killed many of the young men and often violated the women.

At the time of the four apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe, between December 9 and December 12, 1531 memories of the conquest — the massacres, the destruction of the temples were still very much alive in the minds of the Natives.

BUILD TEMPLE

The site where the temple should be built also had great significance for the Natives because it was the place where they had worshipped the mother of gods.

Also, when Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared she described herself as the Mother of the True God, of the one who created heaven and earth — a description that also applied to the Natives' great god Omecihuatl.

So the Virgin who appeared at Tepeyac was associated with motherhood, with birth, with new life.

Their old life, their old civilization, an era, had ended — their temples, their previous way of life destroyed — and Our Lady of Guadalupe was bringing forth new life, a new people, a new era and a new civilization.

At that time also, it should be remembered many early missionaries saw the discovery and exploration of the New World as an act of divine providence.

EUROPE CORRUPT

Many of them saw Europe as corrupt and they hoped for a new Christianity. They saw the New World as a place where they could start building a renewed Christianity and not simply continue the Church of Europe. They were looking for a new age of the Spirit.

Many of them felt the need for a radical re

turn to the Gospel, for a renewal of Christianity. Missionaries with that feeling saw Our Lady of Guadalupe as a source of that new beginning and a renewal of Christianity in the New World.

Our Lady of Guadalupe, of course, is a title given by the Spaniards. It was thought to have been given through a misunderstanding of Juan Diego's message. Our Lady naturally had spoken a Native language to him, but the Spaniards believed he was using the word Guadalupe, the site of another shrine to the Blessed Mother in Spain. So probably a more accurate title for Our Lady of Guadalupe would be Our Lady of Tepeyac, where she had appeared—as is the case for example, at Lourdes and Fatima.

SOURCE OF HELP

Today, Our Lady of Guadalupe can still be a source of help for everyone in the renewal of Christianity and of Society.

Father Virgilio Elizondo, founder of the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, has said that Our Lady of Guadalupe has shown that “out of the chaos and suffering of past years can come a new creation.” She is, he said, a living symbol of liberation, a mother to right wrongs and to “walk along with her children in their struggle for the fullness of human life.”

For the Mexican-Americans, the Chicanos, — who have suffered greatly — Father Elizondo has added that she can also be a symbol of unity in their efforts to leave the state of oppression and enter the state of being free human beings.

EVANGELIZER

But the Mexican-Americans, he stressed, cannot simply be satisfied to enter society as equals, because, with the help of Our Lady of Guadalupe, they should enter society also with a mission, as evangelizers. “The role of the powerless,” he pointed out, “is to evangelize the powerful.”

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