

The Franciscan Bishop of Mexico was struggling to evangelize in the new world. He was not able to communicate in the native Indians. When he tried to address the Spanish exploitation of the native population, the bishop ran into fierce opposition. Bishop Juan de Zumárraga was almost assassinated by his brother Spaniards.

Jesus said: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). At a loss of how to share the good news amidst failure after failure, Bishop Zumárraga recognized he didn’t have what it took. He told his fellow missionaries “If God does not intervene to provide an instant remedy, this land is on the verge of being lost forever...”ⁱ Little did he realize how his desperate cry for help would be answered.

Juan Diego, a Mexican Indian, was on his way to catechism class when the Mother of God appeared to him on December 9th, 1531. She asked him to take a message to the bishop. Juan Diego felt he was not fit for the job. Certainly, someone of greater stature in society would be a better messenger.

Despite these reservations, he went to see the bishop. He brought the unbelievable message that the Lady wanted Bishop Zumárraga to build a church and dedicate it the Blessed Virgin in the valley of Tepyac. Sure enough, Zumárraga found it hard to believe. He questioned the credibility of Juan Diego who hadn’t wanted to deliver the message in the first place.

Mary appeared to Juan Diego a second time. If at first you don’t succeed, try and try again. Mary insisted that he go back to the bishop and explain again. With this second visit, the bishop asked for a sign to authenticate that it was truly the Blessed Virgin. Juan reported this to the Blessed Mother, and she instructed Juan Diego to come back the following day.

Sometimes we are so focused on our own worries that we fail to allow Jesus to help us with his plans. Juan Diego was concerned about his sick uncle and placed helping his uncle as a priority over and above meeting the Blessed Mother. He tried to avoid her, but she came to him anyway. Mary chided Juan Diego for trying to avoid her but reassured him that his uncle would recover from his serious illness. She told him go to the top of the hill and pick flowers to bring to the bishop. The hilltop was dry and rocky and not a natural place for flowers to grow in the winter. Nevertheless, Juan Diego found the most beautiful and extraordinary flowers. He wrapped the roses in his cloak, a tilma, and carried the bundle to the bishop.

When the bishop saw the roses, he was duly impressed. These roses grew in Zumárraga’s home village in Spain and were completely foreign to Mexico. More miraculous though was the poor tilma that Juan Diego had wrapped the roses in. It was the consistency of a burlap sack, yet it now contained the most beautiful image imaginable.

The Virgin Mother appeared as a “mestiza” (a woman of mixed race). She was wrapped in the sun with the moon at her feet. Her robe was studded with stars. This evoked biblical imagery for the bishop. For Juan Diego, the image on his tilma had symbols from the native culture compatible with pre-Christian religious beliefs. “The image is a code that the Indians understood perfectly.”ⁱⁱ The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the garment of a peasant, elevated the natives to the status of noblemen. Indeed, we are new creations in Christ through our baptism and we receive a royal inheritance.

Bishop Zumárraga and the Franciscans had very meager results to show for their own efforts. Juan Diego was a rare success already baptized and a practicing Catholic at the time of the apparition. He agreed to be a caretaker at the site where the first humble church was built, and he told his story time and time again.

The native people came, they saw, and they believed. “The Indians were coming from everywhere, from faraway lands asking for the sacraments... by 1539, only eight years after the

apparition, almost nine million Indians had converted” with the help of Juan Diego and the small group of Franciscans.ⁱⁱⁱ “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light” (Mt 11:29-30).

We celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the 12th of December. But today, the 9th, we celebrate the Feast of Saint Juan Diego.

ⁱcatholicnewsagency.com/news/god_intervened_through_our_lady_of_guadalupe_to_evangelize_the_americas_experts_guadalupe_expert

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid