Our Lady Of
GUADALUPE
MOTHER OF THE CIVILIZATION OF LOVE

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Our Lady of GUADALUPE

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Our Lady of G U A D A L U P E
MOTHER OF THE CIVILIZATION OF LOVE

Carl A. Anderson
Msgr. Eduardo Chávez
To Our Lady of Guadalupe, in the confidence that guided by her, the people of the Christian Hemisphere will work together to encounter her son, Jesus Christ.
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Introduction

Mother of the Civilization of Love

TWO NEW EVANGELISTS

The genesis of this book occurred on July 31, 2002, the day Pope John Paul II canonized Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. We were both present that day in the basilica, but we had not yet met. One of us was participating in the liturgical event that he had worked to achieve for more than a decade as postulator of the Cause for Canonization of Juan Diego. The other had traveled to the basilica eighteen months earlier for his installation Mass as the head of the world’s largest organization of Catholic laymen, the Knights of Columbus. Both of us were deeply touched by our experience that day in Mexico City, and both of us realized we had witnessed one of the
most profound events in the Catholic Church during John Paul II’s pontificate and indeed during our own lifetimes, an event that would give deep and lasting hope to the Catholic Church in North America.

This may strike many as an extraordinary claim; after all, John Paul II is now regarded universally as one of the greatest popes in the two-thousand-year history of the Catholic Church. As pope, he canonized and beatified hundreds of people, wrote numerous encyclicals on theological, moral, and social topics, and commissioned the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the first definitive work of its kind in more than four hundred years. He brought interreligious dialogue to new and unexpected levels while guiding the Church into the new millennium with the focus of hope in Christ. Beyond the Church, he changed the political map of Europe and the very course of history by helping to liberate nations trapped behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War and aiding in their cause for self-determination within the Soviet Union. Beyond Europe’s borders, his concerns for the poor, the disadvantaged, and the war-torn brought a greater commitment to human rights and democracy, especially to Latin America and Africa. But in Mexico that day, as he knelt and prayed awhile before the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe after the ceremony, it was clear that he did not want to leave; when he rose to leave, he entrusted all people to the intercession of the newest saint in the Church. He had not only canonized a man of the past but also given our continent a saint for the future.

Yet, early in John Paul’s pontificate, Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico was an important, perhaps even indispensable, presence. In an interesting way, John Paul II’s first invitation to the basilica was not intended for him; the Latin American Bishops Conference had extended the invitation to his predecessor the month before, and it was only his predecessor’s death that opened this opportunity to John Paul II.¹ In a telling way, it was John Paul II’s deter-
mined desire to pray at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe and to personally engage in the meetings regarding the future of the Church in America that caused him to accept the invitation his predecessor had declined. (Twenty-three years later, Mexico would see this same determination; shortly before his trip for Juan Diego’s canonization, John Paul II met with his medical specialists, who advised against his making the trip. But at the end of the consultation, John Paul II thanked them for their concern and concluded the meeting by saying: “I will see you in Mexico.”) Later, John Paul II would reflect on his first visit to Mexico, recalling that “to some degree, this pilgrimage inspired and shaped all of the succeeding years of my pontificate.”

If John Paul’s pilgrimage to Mexico shaped the rest of his life as the universal pastor of the Church, his choice to visit Mexico first and his words commending Juan Diego as an evangelist expressed a new importance and new understanding of the Church in the Americas. He recognized the Americas as a hemisphere with a unique, rich Catholic history, and thus as a hemisphere with a unique, rich place in the future of the Church, a hemisphere with great ability to respond to and benefit from a renewed living out of the Gospel of love seen in the witness of the saints. It was in this context that a few months later, the cause for Juan Diego’s canonization was officially opened and the Church in the Americas was reexamined and given a new focus: the new evangelization.

NEW SAINT, RENEWED DEVOTION

The story of St. Juan Diego is, of course, the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The event of his canonization cannot be understood apart from the events of her appearance. As with any apparition claim, every detail of the Guadalupan accounts must be examined: each
word spoken, each miraculous or extraordinary event that deviates from the everyday, the sequence of events, the character of the people involved, their reactions to the event, their lives afterward, and especially any lingering miraculous effect. For this, we begin with Antonio Valeriano’s Nican Mopohua, an account of the Guadalupan apparitions in 1531, the earliest extant edition of which is currently housed in the New York Public Library. The historical record suggests that Valeriano may have derived the information in the Nican Mopohua directly from Juan Diego himself, writing it down sometime before Juan Diego’s death in 1548 and within two decades of the apparition. Besides this significant work, numerous historical records recall in varying degrees of detail the Guadalupan apparitions, the miraculous image, the church on Tepeyac hill, and Juan Diego’s own life; some of the most substantial works include the Nican Moteçpana, the Información de 1556, and the Informaciones Jurídicas de 1666. Other items composing the complex record of the Guadalupan event include written accounts, artwork, recorded oral testimonies, investigations, wills, and other works.

Because Juan Diego would be the first Mexican indigenous saint of that time and place, the canonization process demanded extensive research, requiring a grasp of both the history of colonization in New Spain and pre-Colonial culture and religion. Contemporary scholars, historians, and anthropologists specializing in the culture and history of Mexico’s Indian people were consulted, and nearly four thousand documents related to Our Lady of Guadalupe were reviewed. Ultimately, the knowledge and insights from such research have revealed the profound relevance and symbolic richness of the apparitions and the miraculous image on Juan Diego’s tilma (a cloak-like garment), showing how the Guadalupan event conveys in the language and culture of the Indians a message of hope and love.
While the facts regarding Colonial Mexico cannot be changed, the perspective advocated by historians and even the public at large has changed. Unlike many scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contemporary biographers and historians often highlight the Spanish conquest and occupation of Mexico as a volatile period of spiritual repression, conflict, and violence. By bringing to light the complexity of this period, contemporary research has played an enormous role in helping us to better comprehend—and even test the veracity of—the Guadalupan apparitions. But unfortunately, while the idea of “conversion by the sword” is now familiar, some people may view the Guadalupan apparition and devotions as a mere by-product of colonization: as a strategic devotion fabricated by missionaries seeking to convert or pacify the Indians with a Christian-Aztec story, or as a subversive devotion adopted by Indians who were confused or sought to preserve elements of Aztec religion with a façade of Christianity. Undoubtedly, the Guadalupan devotions were a cause of concern and confusion at some times, but for us this should not be surprising, considering how even today, in the Information Age, we often encounter mixed reports even on less extraordinary events. While in this book we wish to do more than judge and debate about the Catholicity of Guadalupan devotees, nevertheless it is perhaps necessary to address some generalizations about the devotion that often sidetrack readers from the religious significance of the apparition’s expression of the Gospel.

First, to write off the rise of Guadalupan devotion to manipulation and misunderstanding is not only simplistic but also historically incongruous regarding a politically and religiously complex situation. Among the missionaries, there was no unified front encouraging the apparitions, as many missionaries doubted and even tried to suppress the Indians’ new devotion to the
Guadalupan Virgin. Furthermore, while the missionaries desired conversions, their distrust of the Indians’ Catholicity verged on the scrupulous, even by modern standards; these same missionaries, some of whom were sophisticated letrados (theologians) in Spain, were known to hold off giving Indians the sacraments and to eliminate symbolic elements of sacraments that were too similar to Aztec rites solely in order to keep the distinctiveness of the Christian faith obvious. That is, although oversight may have occurred, purposeful theological contamination, deception, and obfuscation were largely out of character. Additionally, there was a whole range of converts among the Indians, including many who completely forsook their indigenous religious practices—but not culture—for a Christian way of life. What is more, their life as Christians went beyond practices or rites of belonging, such as baptism, to include catechesis.

Likewise, the rise of Guadalupan devotion cannot be explained as a devotion taken up to appease Christianizing government authorities; after all, at the time of the apparition, many of the Spanish authorities in Mexico were themselves incurring excommunication, caring less for Christian life and evangelization than for their greed-ridden pursuit of political gains. The fact is, while the people in Mexico were involved in both political and religious changes, the Guadalupan devotion was not used politically until the devotion arrived in Spain, when an admiral in the royal Spanish fleet took up the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the battle of Lepanto and attributed the subsequent victory to her intercession. Moreover, even though in later Mexican history the image and devotion were appropriated to serve various political and economic causes (notably during the 1810 War of Independence), the original meaning and message of Our Lady of Guadalupe transcends the flaws and purposes of those who have turned to her.

For some, Juan Diego may seem yet another individual
“divinized” in answer to the universal human desire for heroes to look up to. This, too, reflects another trend of demythologizing the very men once lauded as great heroes. In this light, what is striking is how Juan Diego’s role in the apparition—even as passed down in testimonies—is already rather humble. While he was called to a significant and meaningful task, he was not called to a “great” task by any measure of earthly grandeur. His role in the apparition itself—his first and greatest claim to renown—was not a call to conquer lands but a simple invitation to intercede on behalf of one person by communicating a request to another. In essence, it was to vouch for and trust in another person. This simple act is the kernel of meaning and truth that is served, and not obscured, by the grandeur of the divine visitations, the healings, and the miraculous tilma. It was by answering this simple invitation that Juan Diego set himself apart; his was a gesture of humility, communication, advocacy, and trust, a gesture that we perform in less miraculous ways and situations every day of our lives. It is one of the most fundamental gestures of our humanity and the foundation of any society that wishes to live beyond selfish utilitarianism.

THE NEWNESS OF GUADALUPE

Consequently, although we believe the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe to be a historical fact, we do not think that it should be consigned only to the pages of history books. In fact, in a unique way, the full radicalness of Our Lady of Guadalupe’s apparition can only be understood fully now, when Catholicism’s most expressed model for society is a Civilization of Love and its greatest explication of human dignity is the Theology of the Body. For at the time, the violence institutionalized in Aztec religion
was not the only place where harsh practices could be found: the European justice system employed in Colonial Mexico and many of the “standards” of holiness among Catholics often included severe punishments and harsh penitential practices that still make us uneasy, even if the practices were less violent and more theologically different from the Aztec human sacrifices. What is notable is that this harshness is not corroborated in the words of the Virgin. In fact, while other Marian apparitions (such as those at Fatima and Lourdes) included words of admonishment or even warnings, Our Lady of Guadalupe’s only words of spiritual guidance are her gentle but persistent reminders to Juan Diego about love: a love that can be trusted, a love that gives dignity, a love that is personal. If we are to see in her words an answer to a spiritual problem, the spiritual problem it answers is a lack of love and a lack of understanding about love as relationship rather than as practice. The Guadalupan message is, in its originality, a spiritual education, an education in love.

Today, as life is often characterized by a lack of love and by misunderstandings and misgivings about love, her message is one to take to heart. For this reason, like John Paul II, we think that one of the greatest influences of Our Lady of Guadalupe upon the history of the Western Hemisphere may still be before us. In the sixteenth century, Our Lady of Guadalupe became an expression of hope and unity for millions throughout the Americas. We are convinced that Our Lady of Guadalupe’s message is today capable of being not only an expression but a true catalyst of hope and unity for millions more throughout North America and the world.

In the Christian sense, this hope and unity are spread through evangelization—that is, through helping one another to find in Jesus Christ the “adequate dimension” of our own life. A clear picture of how Christians in this hemisphere can approach this
task spiritually can be seen in the triptych that Benedict XVI presented in Aparecida, Brazil, on his first apostolic journey to the Western Hemisphere, depicting St. Juan Diego “evangelizing with the Image of the Virgin Mary on his mantle and with the Bible in his hand” and inscribed below with the phrase “You shall be my witnesses.” To evangelize in the future is to evangelize from and through these first witnesses of Christianity.

Historically in our continent, Mexico was not the only country to be changed by this Marian evangelization. As later missionaries left Mexico for the neighboring countries in the hemisphere, including to the lands of the future United States, their evangelization was defined by their devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. As John Paul II wrote in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*:

> 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 to the whole continent . . . [which] has recognized in the mestiza face of the Virgin of Tepeyac, “in Blessed Mary of Guadalupe, an impressive example of a perfectly enculturated evangelization.”

For this reason, the pope continued, Our Lady of Guadalupe is venerated throughout the Western Hemisphere as “Queen of all America,” and he encouraged that her December 12 feast day be celebrated not only in Mexico but throughout the hemisphere.

Just as Mary’s enculturated evangelization overflowed Mexico’s borders, so it overflows the confines of the era and the culture of the apparition. For this reason, she is not only the “Patroness of all America” but the “Star of the first and new evan-
gelization” who will “guide the Church in America . . . so that the new evangelization may yield a splendid flowering of Christian life.” Our Lady of Guadalupe is more than an event; she is a person. As part of her continuing witness to Christ, she continues to aid the men and women of the Western Hemisphere and lead them to a greater encounter with Christ.

While two oceans may delineate our hemisphere and define us as a single community, the solidarity of the Christian life proposed by Our Lady of Guadalupe brings us to a greater solidarity, a global solidarity, when she leads us to a greater encounter with “the uniqueness of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist.” Through the Eucharist, believers of all nations and cultures find themselves on a path of communion. This communion finds its ultimate source and summit in the communion within the Holy Trinity. As John Paul II wrote:

Faced with a divided world which is in search of unity, we must proclaim with joy and firm faith that God is communion, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, unity in distinction, and that he calls all people to share in that same Trinitarian communion. We must proclaim that this communion is the magnificent plan of God the Father; that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Lord, is the heart of this communion, and that the Holy Spirit works ceaselessly to create communion and to restore it when it is broken.

At Aparecida, Benedict XVI raised this conviction with even greater eloquence and at the same time emphasized its transformative power: “Only from the Eucharist will the civilization of love spring forth which will transform Latin America and the Caribbean, making them not only the Continent of Hope, but also the Continent of Love!”

To venerate Our Lady of Guadalupe as Patroness of the
Americas and Star of the first and new evangelization is to venerate her precisely as a Eucharistic woman, a woman through whom Christ came to humanity, a woman who experienced a unique closeness with the Holy Trinity. By leading millions more to her Son, and especially to her Son’s real presence in the Eucharist, she will guide the people of the Western Hemisphere to a greater unity whose source is itself Trinitarian communion. For her love surpasses herself, and leads us to the source of love, a Source which demands from us and enables us to love our neighbor without reservation, without hesitation, without borders. For this reason, Our Lady of Guadalupe should also be venerated under the title Mother of the Civilization of Love.

According to tradition, after approving the patronage of Our Lady of Guadalupe over New Spain in 1754, Pope Benedict XIV quoted Psalm 147, saying, “God has not done anything like this for any other nation.” We may never understand the full uniqueness of this apparition. But through the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, we can expect to see the beauty and power of this event in the transformation of our lives and blossoming of our communities and ultimately our continent.
PART I

Approaching an Apparition
I.

An Apparition of Reconciliation and Hope

I am the handmaid of the Lord.

—Words of Mary in the Gospel of Luke

JUAN DIEGO

The Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe has witnessed many grand and reverent ceremonies through the centuries, but few like the Mass celebrated July 31, 2002 for the canonization of St. Juan Diego. Thousands of people attended the three-hour canonization Mass, while thousands more watched on screens set up just outside the basilica and throughout Mexico City. Entire boulevards were closed down to make room for pilgrims. Among those attending the Mass was Mexico’s president, Vicente Fox, whose presence marked a historic occasion: the first time a Mexican chief executive attended a papal Mass. Priests read from the Bible in Spanish and in the indigenous language Náhuatl, and while a portrait of
Juan Diego was carried to the altar, Indians in colorfully plumed headdresses danced up the main aisle of the basilica.

Twelve years earlier, Juan Diego’s beatification had been the result of rigorous historical research and examination into his life and later testimonies about him. Through this research, evidence of early devotion to Juan Diego and recognition of his saintliness dating back to the sixteenth century was uncovered. With this, the approval of an immemorial cultus was granted and the requirements for beatification were met. For Juan Diego’s canonization, however, something more was needed: a miracle. But as it happened, on the same day that John Paul II was celebrating Juan Diego’s beatification Mass, that miracle happened.

On May 3, 1990, in Mexico City, nineteen-year-old Juan José Barragán suffered from severe depression and, wanting to commit suicide, he threw himself from the balcony of his apartment, striking his head on the concrete pavement thirty feet below, despite his mother’s frantic attempts to hold onto him as she cried out to Juan Diego for help. The young man was rushed to the nearby hospital, where the doctor there noted his serious condition and suggested that the boy’s mother pray to God. To this, the young man’s mother replied that she already had prayed for Juan Diego’s intercession. For three days, examination and intensive care continued, and physicians diagnosed a large basal fracture of the skull—a wound that normally would have killed at the moment of impact, and even now destroyed any hope of survival or repair. Given the mortal nature of the wounds, on May 6 all extraordinary medical support was ceased, and young Juan José’s death was thought to be imminent. But that same day, Juan José sat up, began to eat, and within ten days was entirely recovered, with no debilitating side-effects, not even so much as a headache. In the scans, the doctors could see clear evidence of the life-threatening fracture, but to their surprise they noticed that the bone was mended, with the arteries and veins
all in place. Astonished, they requested more tests by specialists for second opinions, only to have their original assessment confirmed. Impossible, unexplainable, it was declared a miracle.²

As enormously as it changed Juan José’s life, the miracle affirmed the life of another: an Indian convert born five centuries earlier at the height of the Aztec Empire, Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin. Ultimately, it was this miracle that led to Juan Diego’s canonization.

Juan Diego was born around the year 1474 in Cuautitlán of the Texcoco kingdom, part of the Triple Alliance with the Aztec Empire. Known by his indigenous name Cuauhtlatoatzin, meaning “eagle that speaks,” he belonged to the Chichimecas, a people that had assumed Toltec culture whose wise men had reached the conception of only one God.³ As a macehual, a middle-class commoner, he owned property through inheritance.⁴

The first of many great changes in his life came around 1524, when the fifty-year-old Cuauhtlatoatzin and his wife requested baptism from one of the early Franciscan missionaries to Mexico and received their Christian names, Juan Diego and María Lucía. Together, they were one of the first Catholic married couples of the New World. Five years later, María Lucía died, leaving Juan Diego alone with his elderly uncle, Juan Bernardino, also a recent convert, in the town of Tulpetlac, near Mexico City.⁵

Juan Diego’s conversion had been made possible just ten years earlier, when Hernán Cortés and his men conquered the great Aztec Empire, ultimately laying waste to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán and its main temple, the Templo Mayor (Great Temple). Having lived in the town of Cuautitlán in the nearby kingdom of Texcoco and then in the town of Tulpetlac, Juan Diego was no doubt familiar with the Aztecs and their campaign for empire. He also would have been familiar with their religious practices, which demanded human sacrifices to sustain the Aztec gods and maintain the harmony of the cosmos. The introduction of
Christianity to the New World came with the Spanish conquest of Mexico; missionaries were sent to teach the faith, and the Indians were discouraged from practicing their own religion. Human sacrifice was prohibited and temples were torn down. Despite these efforts, missionary activity in the New World met with only very modest success. It is this history of conquest and its aftermath, along with the cultural and religious heritage of the indigenous people, that constitutes a vital lens in interpreting the significance of the Guadalupan apparitions for the Colonial Indians. More than that, it shows how the apparitions at Guadalupe resolved some of the deep-seated problems posed by the Aztec religion—problems that were doubtless exacerbated in the Indians’ encounter with Spanish colonialism.6

After María Lucía’s death, Juan Diego continued to grow in his faith; to the missionaries, who were accustomed to meager resources and unsuccessful efforts, Juan Diego’s dedication to the Christian faith must have been a welcome surprise. Although there was no established church in the area, every Saturday and Sunday Juan Diego rose at dawn to walk nine miles to the nearest doctrina (place of religious instruction) in Tlaltelolco, where he could attend Mass and receive instruction in the faith. At the time, Mexico City was a small island in Lake Texcoco, and so in order to attend these services in Tlaltelolco, Juan Diego would have to travel south from Tulpetlac, walk around the western side of Tepeyac hill, and then along a great causeway connecting Mexico City to the mainland.

THE FIRST APPARITION

On one of his Saturday trips for catechesis, on December 9, 1531, when he arrived at the Tepeyac area, Juan Diego heard beautiful
singing that seemed to be coming from the top of Tepeyac hill. The singing sounded like a chorus of birds, but more beautiful than the song of any birds Juan Diego had ever heard before. Juan Diego wondered as he looked eastward toward the top of the hill:

By any chance am I worthy, have I deserved what I hear? Perhaps I am only dreaming it? Perhaps I am only dozing? Where am I? Where do I find myself? Is it possible that I’m in the place our ancient ancestors, our grandparents, told us about: in the land of the flowers, in the land of corn, of our flesh, of our sustenance, perhaps in the land of heaven?

In these moments before Juan Diego encounters the first apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe, signs of renewal are already present. In Christianity, the east, the direction of the rising sun, is often used to symbolize resurrection and renewal, themes especially evident in Juan Diego’s initial words of wonderment. Drawing on images from his indigenous heritage, Juan Diego attempts to describe something of the indescribable mystery of heaven, referring to it as “the land of the flowers, the land of corn, of our flesh, of our sustenance.” For the Indians, both flowers and corn held great religious and cultural significance. On one hand, flowers, like song, were evocative of the truth and were considered the only things that, as an Aztec sage once wrote, “will not come to an end”; on the other hand, corn was an essential food staple, relied upon heavily by the Aztecs and without which Aztec life would have suffered greatly.

Suddenly, the singing stopped, and a woman’s voice called out to him: “Juantzin, Juan Diegotzin,” the Náhuatl affectionate diminutive form of his Spanish baptismal name. Acknowledging the woman’s affectionate greeting, Juan Diego ascended the hill and found himself before a beautiful woman adorned in clothing
that “shone like the sun.” She stood upon stones that seemed to send forth beams of light like precious jade and other jewels; the “earth seemed to shine with the brilliance of a rainbow,” and the foliage had the brightness of turquoise and quetzal feathers. She asked Juan Diego where he was going, and Juan Diego replied that he was on his way to “your little house in Mexico, Tlaltelolco, to follow the things of God.” Notably, he said this even before the Virgin introduced herself, thus underscoring Juan Diego’s early awareness of the important relationship between Mary and the Church.

Then, speaking to Juan Diego in his native language Náhuatl and using Texcocan religious phrases, the woman introduced herself in an unmistakably clear way, saying:

I am the ever-perfect holy Mary, who has the honor to be the mother of the true God [téotl Dios] by whom we all live [Ipalmemohuani], the Creator of people [Teyocoyani], the Lord of the near and far [Tloque Nahuaque], the Lord of heaven and earth [Ilhuicahua Tlaltipaque].

By using both the Náhuatl and Spanish words for God (téotl Dios), the Virgin reaffirms the supremacy, oneness, and universality of God. In her humility, she speaks very little of herself, while referring to God by many titles; importantly, when she does speak of herself, she calls herself “mother” and the “ever-perfect holy Mary.” This title identifies her as the Immaculate Conception, a title not officially recognized until Pope Pius IX approved it more than three centuries later, in 1854. By introducing herself in this way, Mary significantly underscores the humanity and divinity of her Son. As Christ’s mother, Mary shows the humanity of her Son, since she is herself a human being; but as immaculate, she shows the divinity of her Son, who, as God, was singularly born of a sinless woman.
After introducing herself, the Virgin revealed the reason for her appearance:

I want very much that they build my sacred little house here, in which I will show Him, I will exalt Him upon making Him manifest, I will give Him to all people in all my personal love, Him that is my compassionate gaze, Him that is my help, Him that is my salvation. Because truly I am your compassionate Mother, yours and that of all the people that live together in this land, and also of all the other various lineages of men, those who love me, those who cry to me, those who seek me, those who trust in me.16

The Virgin then explained to Juan Diego how she needed him to deliver her message to Friar Juan de Zumárraga, the head of the Church in Mexico City.

Within the context of European Catholicism, the first apparition makes poignantly clear the Virgin Mary’s universal role as mother and her desire to bring all people closer to God through her loving intercession. Less obvious, though no less significant, is what the Virgin’s request for the construction of a church would have meant to a learned Indian. For the indigenous, the temple was more than a religious building, and the establishment of a temple was more than a ceremonial religious occasion. So central was religion to indigenous culture that the temple was seen as the foundation of society. Historically, the construction of a new temple marked the inauguration of a new civilization. In fact, the Aztecs built a temple in the years immediately following their migration to the Valley of Mexico, and a common indigenous glyph, or pictogram, for a conquered people was the depiction of a temple toppling over, sometimes in flames.17 Thus, the Virgin’s commission to Juan Diego was rich in meaning far beyond the
construction of a building, and was made richer still by the fact that it had been given to an Indian.

THE SECOND APPARITION

Juan Diego could hardly face a greater test than going to the head of the Church in Mexico, bishop-elect Friar Juan de Zumárraga. Friar Zumárraga, who had arrived in the New World no more than three years earlier, was an extremely prudent man who, like the other missionary friars, fought vigorously against the idolatry of the time; in fact, in a letter earlier in 1531, he declared that he had caused twenty thousand idols to be destroyed, and in 1529, his agents had been responsible for burning countless native codices, including those in the royal repository at Texcoco. He was particularly suspicious of supposed visions and apparitions, believing most of them to be forms of idolatrous Indian worship. Putting the bishop-elect’s concerns in context, he and the other missionaries living in Mexico were confronted with a people and religion wholly strange to them. They feared that the old religion could interfere or undermine the Indians’ understanding of and conversion to Christianity. Even so, Juan Diego went immediately to the friar’s house, where he waited for a long time before Friar Zumárraga would see him.

Once admitted, Juan Diego told Friar Zumárraga of the apparition, but the bishop, while attentive, was skeptical of Juan Diego’s story. Why would the mother of God appear to this recently converted Indian? Why would she request that a church be built on the flatland of Tepeyac hill, when the hill’s peak had once held an ancient temple dedicated to the pagan goddess Coatlicue? It was a significant request, and the miraculous nature of an apparition was not to be taken lightly. Friar Zumárraga dis-
missed Juan Diego, telling him that he would listen more patiently to his story at another time.

Dejected by the response, Juan Diego returned to Tepeyac hill and, after recounting to the Virgin what had happened, pleaded with her to give the mission to someone more important than himself:

So I beg you . . . to have one of the nobles who are held in esteem, one who is known, respected, honored, have him carry on, take your venerable breath, your venerable word, so that he will be believed. Because I am really just a man from the country, I am the porter’s rope, I am a back-frame, just a tail, a wing; I myself need to be led, carried on someone’s back. . . . My Little Girl, my Littlest Daughter, my Lady, my Girl, please excuse me: I will afflict your face, your heart; I will fall into your anger, into your displeasure, my Lady Mistress.20

Throughout the apparition account, these familiar and affectionate appellations reflect the indigenous form of address in which people might call one another by many titles; for example, consider how a younger boy of the nobility would greet his mother: “Oh my noble person, oh personage, oh Lady, . . . we salute your ladyship and rulership. How did you enjoy your sleep, and now how are you enjoying the day?”21

The Virgin listened with tenderness but responded firmly:

Listen, my youngest son, know for sure that I have no lack of servants [and] messengers to whom I can give the task of carrying my breath, my word, so that they carry out my will. But it is necessary that you, personally, go and plead, that by your intercession my wish, my will, become a reality. And I beg you, my youngest son, and I strictly order you to go again tomorrow to
see the bishop. And in my name, make him know, make him hear my wish, my will, so that he will bring into being, build my sacred house that I ask of him. And carefully tell him again how I, personally, the ever Virgin Holy Mary, I, who am the Mother of God, sent you as my messenger.22

Certainly there were others more suitable for the task, in terms of both credibility and social status. And why was there a need for an intermediary at all? The Virgin herself could have appeared before the bishop. And yet the Virgin selected Juan Diego—a selection that reflects the words of the Virgin Mary in the Gospel, when she praises God who “has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.”23 The Virgin’s selection of a man of humble rank likewise resonates with Friar Zumárraga’s own vocation as a Franciscan, an order valuing humility and renowned for its vows of poverty; in this spirit of humility, before coming to New Spain, Zumárraga had hoped to end his days living in a quiet, stable community, but was chosen instead for a prominent and demanding position in the New World. Juan Diego, too, seems to confirm the Virgin’s selection; insisting that she find someone better for the task, he reveals himself as the perfect messenger, one who humbly withdraws in order to call attention to the message itself.

THE THIRD APPARITION

When Juan Diego returned to the bishop the next day to deliver the Virgin’s message, Friar Zumárraga questioned Juan Diego on many details of the apparition. This time, before sending Juan Diego away, Friar Zumárraga requested evidence that would confirm the truth of his story. Undaunted by this request,
Juan Diego left, promising to return with a sign from the Virgin.

The bishop, disarmed by Juan Diego’s confidence, sent two men to follow him to make sure that Juan Diego was not up to any tricks. The two men trailed Juan Diego for a good while but lost sight of him as he crossed the ravine near the bridge to Tepeyac. After a desperate and unsuccessful search, they returned to Friar Zumárraga’s home and, infuriated with Juan Diego for having wasted their time, told Zumárraga that Juan Diego was a sorcerer and a fraud who deserved punishment to prevent him from lying again.

In the meantime, Juan Diego arrived at Tepeyac hill and found the Virgin there waiting for him. Kneeling down before her, he recounted his second meeting with Friar Zumárraga and told her of the bishop’s request for a sign. Again with words of kindness, the Virgin thanked Juan Diego for his faithful service to her and assured him of the success of his mission, asking him to return the next day to receive a sign for him to take to Friar Zumárraga.

THE FOURTH APPARITION

Upon Juan Diego's arrival home, however, his plans to return to the Virgin were quickly set aside. While he was away, his uncle Juan Bernardino had taken gravely ill. So the following day, instead of going to Tepeyac, Juan Diego spent his time finding and bringing a doctor to help his uncle, but to no avail; although the doctor ministered to Juan Bernardino, his efforts were too late and death became imminent.

Apart from his love for his uncle, this would have been devastating to Juan Diego because of the important role the uncle played in Indian culture.24 As Friar Sahagún, one of the early mis-
tionaries to the New World and a scholar of Indian culture, notes: “These natives were accustomed to leaving an uncle as guardian or tutor of their children, of their property, of their wife and of their whole house . . . as if it were his own.” Additionally, being Juan Diego’s elder, Juan Bernardino occupied another essential and well-respected role in his nephew’s life and in the community at large. With the absence of writing, knowledge was primarily passed from one generation to the next by oral tradition, through the accurate, word-for-word recitation of discourses from the huehuetlatolli, the “speech of the elders.” Describing the importance of such speech, one indigenous man explained that the words of the huehuetlatolli were “handed down to you . . . carefully folded away, stored up in your entrails, in your throat.” It was through the traditions and wisdom passed down by the community elders that the contemporary indigenous world was guided and given meaning. Thus, community elders and the huehuetlatolli, far more than just sources of advice and education, constituted the very fabric from which indigenous identity was formed.

Although both Juan Diego and Juan Bernardino were dedicated to their new Christian faith, there is no reason to think that the special role accorded to the elders in indigenous culture would not have retained a prominent place within Juan Diego’s worldview. The death of his uncle would have signaled something more than just the passing of a close family member, difficult to bear as that would have been; it also could have been seen as the irrevocable loss of a part of Juan Diego’s own identity. To a certain degree, the fear and uncertainty confronting Juan Diego were experienced by many other Indian communities and families as well, some of which were decimated by disease and uprooted from their traditional religious practices. And yet, even at this moment, Juan Bernardino showed the strength of his own faith and his trust in
the faith of his nephew. He begged Juan Diego to bring a priest to hear his confession and prepare him for death. So the following day, December 12, Juan Diego wrapped himself in a tilma to protect his body from the cold and hurried off toward the doctrina at Tlaltelolco.

As he approached Tepeyac hill, Juan Diego remembered his promised appointment with the Virgin. However, aware of his uncle’s condition, he did not want to delay his journey, and so he avoided his usual path in the hope of evading the Virgin. Yet as he rounded the hill he saw the Virgin descend from the top of the hill to greet him. Concerned, she inquired: “My youngest son, what’s going on? Where are you going? Where are you headed?”

Juan Diego, at once surprised, confused, fearful, and embarrassed, told the Virgin of his uncle’s illness and of his new errand, and expressed something of the hopelessness he was then experiencing, saying, “Because in reality for this [death] we were born, we who came to await the task of our death.” Still, even in his distress, he remained committed to his mission. He promised: “Afterwards I will return here again to go carry your venerable breath, your venerable word, Lady, my little girl. Forgive me, be patient with me a little longer, because I am not deceiving you with this . . . tomorrow without fail I will come in all haste.”

The Virgin listened to Juan Diego’s plea, and when he had finished she spoke to him:

Listen, put it into your heart, my youngest son, that what frightened you, what afflicted you, is nothing; do not let it disturb your face, your heart; do not fear this sickness nor any other sickness, nor any sharp and hurtful thing. Am I not here, I who 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 something more?31

In this passage, the Virgin’s words not only have important associations with motherhood but also have imperial associations as well. Specifically, her words bear a special resemblance to the words addressed to the Aztec emperor upon his succession to the throne:

Perhaps at some time they [your people] may seek a mother, a father [protection]; but they will also weep before you, place their tears, their indigence, their penury . . . Also perhaps the tranquility, the joy with which they will receive from you, that will be gathered in you because you are their mother, their shelter, because you love them deeply, you help them, you are their lady.32

The Virgin is mother and queen, and she reveals herself to Juan Diego in both of these capacities.

Interestingly, we see in this another sign of the cultural accuracy of the Nican Mopohua; although it was common to address persons using many different relationship titles, “inferiors never called superiors by name and rarely even referred openly to any relationship that might exist between them, whereas superiors could do both (though sparingly).”33 In the Nican Mopohua, nowhere does Juan Diego address the Virgin by the name of Mary; nor does he address her as a mother. In contrast, the Virgin’s first words call him by name, and from the beginning, she calls him “my dear son” and breaks the silence about their relationship by calling herself by the title Juan Diego does not address her by: mother.
MORE THAN FLOWERS

At this moment, Our Lady of Guadalupe began to reveal herself to the world—not through Juan Diego himself but through his uncle. Following her words of consolation to Juan Diego, the Virgin assured Juan Diego of his uncle’s recovery, saying, “Don’t grieve your uncle’s illness, because he will not die of it for now; you may be certain that he is already healed.” In fact, as Juan Diego would later learn, at that very moment she was also appearing to Juan Bernardino. Juan Diego trusted the Virgin completely and again implored her for a sign that he could take as proof to Friar Zumárraga.

The Virgin instructed Juan Diego to go to the top of Tepeyac hill, where he would now find a variety of flowers for him to cut, gather, and bring back to her so that she could then arrange them in his tilma. Obediently, Juan Diego climbed up the hill and was amazed to find—in the arid winter environment, and in a rocky place where usually only thistles, mesquites, cacti, and thorns grew—a garden brimming with dew-covered flowers of the sweetest scent. Juan Diego quickly gathered them up in his tilma and took them back down to where the Virgin was waiting. The Virgin, taking the flowers from Juan Diego, arranged them in his tilma and said to him:

My youngest son, these different kinds of flowers are the proof, the sign that you will take to the bishop. You will tell him for me that in them he is to see my wish and that therefore he is to carry out my wish, my will; and you, you who are my messenger, in you I place my absolute trust.

Upon hearing this, Juan Diego set out once again for the bish-
op’s house, reassured by the sign he carried and enjoying the beautiful fragrance of the flowers in his tilma.

Perhaps it is in this moment, as the Virgin stoops to rearrange the flowers in Juan Diego’s tilma, that we are given the most poetically poignant expression of what the apparitions at Guadalupe would have meant to the Indian people. In her appearances on Tepeyac, the Virgin takes what is good and true in the Indian culture and rearranges it in such a way that these same elements are brought to the fulfillment of truth. In the Indian culture, flowers and song (which, you will recall, Juan Diego heard just before the first apparition) were symbols of truth—more specifically, the truth that, though somehow intuited by reason, is never comprehensively grasped. Thus the Virgin’s sign of flowers, which had to undo the lie told to Friar Zumárraga by the false servants, possesses a double meaning: more than a sign for the bishop that is impossible to explain away as a mere trick by Juan Diego, it is also for the indigenous people a sign of truth.

With these flowers in his tilma, Juan Diego arrived at Friar Zumárraga’s residence, but the doorman and servants refused to allow him to enter, pretending not to hear his request. Nevertheless, as Juan Diego continued to wait, the servants grew curious about what he carried in his tilma and approached him. Juan Diego, afraid he could not protect the flowers from their grasping hands, opened his tilma just enough for the servants to see some of the flowers. As the servants reached down into Juan Diego’s tilma, the flowers suddenly appeared as if painted or embroidered on the tilma’s surface.

Amazed, the servants took Juan Diego to see Friar Zumárraga, and Juan Diego, kneeling before the bishop, told him what the Virgin had said. Then Juan Diego unfolded his tilma, letting the
flowers fall to the floor, only to reveal upon his tilma’s rough sur-
face an image of the Virgin Mary. In amazement, those present
knelt down, overwhelmed with emotion. Friar Zumárraga like-
wise knelt in tears, praying for the Virgin’s forgiveness for not hav-
ing attended to her wish. Then Friar Zumárraga untied the tilma
from around Juan Diego’s neck, took it immediately into his pri-
vate chapel, and welcomed Juan Diego to spend the rest of the day
in his home.

The following day, Friar Zumárraga, guided by Juan Diego,
went to see where the Virgin wished to have her chapel built. And
in this place of craggy rocks, thorns, and spiny cacti—a place
whose barren landscape was reminiscent only of death and the
futility of life—people from the city and nearby towns immediate-
ly came and began construction of the Virgin’s chapel.

In the account of the Guadalupan apparitions and miracles,
there are many significant moments of reconciliation. In the image
itself, one sees a perfect harmony of cultures and their respective
symbols that convey the same truth. But for the Indians and lay-
men, the impression of the Virgin’s image on the tilma and the
acceptance of Juan Diego’s tilma into the chapel are perhaps the
most significant moments. In the Indian culture, the tilma reflect-
ed social status. A peasant’s tilma would be plain and undecorat-
ed, while a tilma with color or decoration was reserved for noble-
men and people of high social rank. But it would have held pow-
eful cultural meaning as well. The tilma also represented protec-
tion, nourishment, matrimony, and consecration—all elements
that would be important as the Guadalupan legacy unfolded. For
the Indians, the Virgin, by placing her image on Juan Diego’s
tilma, gives a new and elevated dignity to the common person and
especially the Indian. Moreover, this dignity is recognized by the
bishop when, as the head of the Church in Mexico, he publicly and
personally accepts the tilma into his own private chapel and welcomes Juan Diego into his home. At this moment, all of Juan Diego’s roles that had previously impeded his total participation in the Church after the conquest—as an Indian, a convert, a layman, and a man of limited social significance—are welcomed as having an important and decisive place in the Church and its mission of evangelization.

A NAME FOR THE VIRGIN

After fulfilling his duty, Juan Diego begged to be excused so that he could return to his uncle, who had been, when he saw him last, seriously ill and near to death. The bishop agreed and sent several men to accompany Juan Diego, ordering them to return with Juan Bernardino if he was in good health. When they arrived at the town of Tulpetlac, they were astonished to find Juan Bernardino completely recovered; he, on the other hand, was just as astonished to find his nephew so highly honored by the accompaniment of persons sent by Friar Zumárraga. Juan Diego then explained to his uncle where he had been, only to learn that Juan Bernardino already knew: the Virgin—exactly as Juan Diego had described her—had come to Juan Bernardino too. She had healed him, instructed him to show himself to the bishop, and told him everything that his nephew was doing for her.

What is more, the Virgin revealed to Juan Bernardino something even more important—her name. Henceforth, she was to be known as “the Perfect Virgin HOLY MARY OF GUADALUPE.”

It is significant that the Virgin chose to disclose her full name not to Juan Diego but instead to his elderly uncle Juan Bernardino. Now there are two witnesses to the apparitions.
While pointing to the veracity of Juan Diego’s account, it also underscores the role of family relationships in learning about the faith and the value of spiritual solidarity. Even before the moment when Juan Bernardino tells his nephew of the Virgin’s appearance, there is already a history of mutual trust and sharing in their relationship together as Christians.

Yet this moment especially speaks of Juan Bernardino in his combined role as community elder and Christian witness. In many of the biblical accounts of Christ’s miraculous healings and those later performed by his apostles, the faith of the healer is integral, but so is the faith of those being healed. Christ would often say to those whom he healed: “Your faith has healed you.” As already suggested, owing to his status as a community elder—a status presumably damaged following his conversion to Christianity—Juan Bernardino represented the indigenous community, both its collective knowledge and its identity. Thus, while his illness and imminent death paralleled the condition of many, so also did his recovery foretell a spiritual recovery and renewal. Specifically, the Virgin gives Juan Bernardino her name with two complementary effects. The first is a restoration of Juan Bernardino in his role as community elder, now as a witness of hope with new wisdom to share. The second is the rooting of her name in the collective knowledge of the Indian people, thus giving them a means to seek her intercession and to be spiritually healed in the hope of her promises. This is true renewal: a renewal of the individual in society and a renewal of culture in hope.

Both the Virgin’s name and Juan Diego’s name are significant within this context, pointing to the need for reconciliation between peoples of different cultures and especially to the importance of inculturation in achieving this reconciliation. While several scholars have argued that the name Guadalupe is of Náhuatl
origin—a mistake that began with Luis Becerra Tanco in 1675, but was subsequently shown inaccurate—the fact is that the Virgin chose a name known by the Spaniards. The true origins of the Virgin’s name run deeper still, once again bringing together elements of the New World and Spain.40 (The name “Mary,” of course, is originally Hebrew, not Spanish.) In Spain, there was a river named Guadalupe that ran through Extremadura, Spain; the name itself was of Arabic origin and meant “river of black gravel.”41 As legend has it, in the thirteenth century, after a statue of the Black Madonna was found on the banks of the Guadalupe River, the Royal Monastery of Santa María de Guadalupe was built in the Virgin’s honor.42 But the historical record shows that the Spaniards did not give the Mexican Virgin the name “Guadalupe.” She chose it—and in doing so she assumed a name that reflected her mission as the one that carries or brings the living water, Jesus Christ.

While it is significant that the Virgin chose a layman as her messenger, thereby underscoring the importance of lay ministry within the Church, it is especially significant that she chose Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, “eagle that speaks.” In Aztec culture, the eagle played an important symbolic role, both as the herald of the Aztec civilization and as the symbol of their patron deity, the sun god. According to Aztec mythology, at some time in the fourteenth century, the Aztecs migrated south to the Valley of Mexico, where an eagle sitting atop a nopal cactus revealed the site of their future capital city, Tenochtitlan (“place of the nopal cactus rock”). But far more than recalling the beginnings of the Aztec civilization, eagles also played an important symbolic role in the contemporary Aztec world, specifically in Aztec religious sacrifice. Revering the eagle as a symbol of the sun, the Aztecs would place the hearts of sacrificial victims in a cuauhxicalli, or “eagle gourd vessel,” sometimes shaped
like the head of an eagle; it was from these eagle vessels that the Aztecs believed the sun would be nourished. Now, at the Virgin’s request, Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin is designated as the messenger of a new civilization. This new civilization, however, is not one in which the lives of the gods are sustained by the sacrifice of human lives for food, but rather one in which all people are called to the God who in Christ is life-giving food for them.

A HOME FOR THE IMAGE

On December 26, 1531, the chapel in the Virgin’s honor was completed. Intended to be as much a home for the image on Juan Diego’s tilma as it was a place for prayer, the chapel was built out of adobe, whitewashed, and roofed with straw in just two weeks. To dedicate the chapel, Juan Diego, Friar Zumárraga, and villagers from Cuauhtitlán processed to the foot of Tepeyac hill and placed the tilma over the chapel’s altar. Housed in this new chapel, called the Hermitage, the tilma and its image attracted attention throughout New Spain. Antonio Valeriano concluded the Nican Mopohua’s apparition account by noting that “absolutely everyone, the entire city, without exception . . . came to acknowledge [the image] as something divine. They came to offer her their prayers [and] they marveled at the miraculous way it had appeared.”

Juan Diego, too, became an important figure in the Virgin’s new shrine. Many who came to the shrine identified in the Virgin’s messenger a beautiful expression of holiness that they wished to imitate so that, as some of the Indians put it, “we also could obtain the eternal joys of Heaven.” In his homily for Juan Diego’s canonization Mass, John Paul II recalled this early recognition of Juan
Diego’s holiness in the developing Mexican Church. Concluding his homily, he prayed:

Blessed Juan Diego, a good, Christian Indian, whom simple people have always considered a saint! . . . We entrust to you our lay brothers and sisters so that, feeling the call to holiness, they may imbue every area of social life with the spirit of the Gospel. . . .

Beloved Juan Diego, “the Eagle that speaks”! Show us the way that leads to the “Dark Virgin” of Tepeyac, that she may receive us in the depths of her heart, for she is the loving, compassionate Mother who guides us to the true God. Amen.47

Nearly five centuries after the apparitions, Juan Diego remains an example for us today, especially for the new evangelization. In his role in the apparition and in his life afterward, he is a model of faith, of devotion, of sacrifice, and of the role of every believer to transform culture—“to imbue every area of social life with the spirit of the Gospel.”48