

Our Lady of Guadalupe (Feast Day December 12)



An elder Mexican man makes his way to Mass in the early morning twilight of December 9, 1531. He is a peasant, a simple farmer and laborer, and he has no education. Born under Aztec rule, he is a convert to Catholicism, and each step he takes this morning is a step into history.

The morning quiet is broken by a strange music that he will later describe as the beautiful sound of birds. Diverting his path to investigate the sound, Juan Diego comes face to face with a radiant apparition of the Virgin Mary.

Juan Diego is 57 years old. He has just encountered the Virgin Mary on Tepeyac Hill, the site of a former Aztec Temple. His wife has died two years earlier, and he lives with his elder uncle, scratching his living from the earth as a humble peasant farmer. Why should this unlearned, man be chosen by Our Lady to carry a message to the Bishop? Perhaps because she would find none other as humble as Juan Diego.

Juan Diego is dazzled by the incredible beauty and miraculous nature of Our Lady's appearance. She appears as a native princess to him, and her words sound more beautiful than the sweetest music ever made.

Our Lady calms the startled traveler, and assures him of who she is. She instructs Juan Diego to visit his bishop and ask that a temple be built on the site of her appearance, so that she will have a place to hear petitions and to heal the suffering of the Mexican people.

"Now go and put forth your best effort," Our Lady instructs.

Visibly shaken, Juan Diego approaches the Bishop who is initially very skeptical of his account. What did this peasant truly want? Does he merely seek attention? Notoriety? Money? Or is he possessed by demons? Has Juan Diego been tricked by the Devil? The Bishop patiently listens to Juan Diego's accounts and dismisses him. The humble farmer has failed.

Juan Diego begins to doubt himself. He returns to Tepeyac Hill where he hopes for some conformation of what he's experienced. Indeed, Our Lady does not disappoint, for she appears again, as radiant as before. Juan Diego tells Our Lady what she already knows, that the Bishop did not believe him. She instructs him to return the next morning and ask again.

The Bishop is beside himself. Why did this peasant insist on telling this story? How could he know if the peasant was lying or perhaps insane? At their second meeting, the Bishop asks for a sign. Juan Diego makes a promise he won't keep, saying he will return the very next morning with a sign from Our Lady.

But that evening, Juan Diego returns home to find his uncle, Juan Bernadino, who is 68 years old, and suddenly, terribly ill. The illness is known to the people there and it brings a burning fever so hot, it's almost always fatal. Juan Diego cannot leave his uncle's bedside to keep his pledge to the Bishop. He spends two days with his uncle, trying to save him. When it becomes apparent his uncle is about to die, he leaves to find a priest who can prepare him for death.

Frightened and saddened, Juan Diego sets off in a great hurry, time is running out, and Juan Diego is afraid his uncle will die without a last confession. On the road, in his way, Our Lady appears for a third time. Upset and afraid, Juan explains himself. Our Lady replies, "Am I not your mother? ... Are you not in the crossing of my arms?" she asks.

Shamed by the admonishment, but emboldened by Our Lady's presence, Juan Diego asks for the sign he promised to the Bishop. He knows he is wrong to doubt Our Lady. Juan Diego is instructed to climb to the top of Tepeyac Hill where he will find flowers. He is to pick the flowers there, which are unlike any he has seen before, and he is to keep them hidden in his tilma until he reaches the Bishop.

Juan Diego is skeptical again. It's December, what flowers could grow on the summit of the hill in this cold? Nevertheless, he obeys and atop the hill he finds a great number of flowering roses which he picks and hastily gathers into his cloak. For the third time, Juan Diego is ushered in to see the Bishop. The skeptical cleric has waited for two days to see what sign Our Lady has for him. Juan opens his tilma, letting the roses cascade to the floor. But more than the roses, both men are astonished to see what is painted on his humble tilma - an exquisite image of Our Lady.

In the image, she stands as she appeared, a native princess with high cheekbones. Her head is bowed and her hands are folded in prayer to God. On her blue cloak, the stars are arranged as they appeared in the morning darkness at the hour of her first apparition. Under her feet, is a great crescent moon, a symbol of the old Aztec religion. The message is clear, she is more powerful than the Aztec gods, yet she herself is not God.

At the same time Our Lady is appearing to Juan Diego, and directing him to cut the flowers on Tepeyac Hill, she also appears to his uncle, Juan Bernadino who believes he is about to die. As soon as she appears, the fever stops and Juan Bernadino feels well again. She tells Juan Bernadino, she wants to be known as "Santa Maria, de Guadalupe." Our Lady of Guadalupe did not appear again, for her mission was complete. The temple was built and remains there today, in what is now a suburb of Mexico City. Juan Diego's tilma, woven from cactus fibers, with a shelf-life of just 30 years at best, remains miraculously preserved.

The symbolism of Our Lady's dress is obvious to over eight million Native Mexicans, whom all speak different languages. She is brighter than the sun, more powerful than any Aztec god, yet she is not a god herself, and she prays to one greater than her. Her gown is adorned with stars in the correct position as in the night sky, and the gold fringe of her cloak mirrors the surrounding countryside. Millions of natives will convert at the news of what has happened. Millions more will make pilgrimages over the next five centuries to see the miraculous tilma, and to honor Our Lady of Guadalupe. Great miracles continue to occur, even today. On October 12, 1945, Pope Pius XII, decreed Our Lady of Guadalupe to be "Patroness of all the Americas." Her feast day is December 12, and it is a Holy Day of Obligation in Mexico.

Our Lady of Guadalupe had this to say to Juan Diego:

"Know for certain, least of my sons, that I am the perfect and perpetual Virgin Mary, Mother of the True God through whom everything lives, the Lord of all things near and far, the Master of heaven and earth. It is my earnest wish that a temple be built here to my honor. Here I will demonstrate, I will exhibit, I will give all my love, my compassion, my help and my protection to the people. I am your merciful mother, the merciful mother of all of you who live united in this land, and of all mankind, of all those who love me, of those who cry to me, of those who seek me, of those who have confidence in me. Here I will hear their weeping, their sorrow, and will remedy and alleviate all their multiple sufferings, necessities and misfortunes."