

Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of America

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It is not surprising to me that the annual celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe is popular at the University of Notre Dame, where I teach. Our Latino students, faculty, and alumni bring to the campus community their deep reverence for the *Guadalupeana*. But I am struck each December 12 by the faces in Notre Dame's Basilica of the Sacred Heart that are not Latino. Like students I meet in my classes on Latino theology and spirituality, many of them had scarcely heard of Guadalupe before they arrived at Notre Dame. Yet they join freely in the singing, the worship, and the procession to the Lady Chapel at the end of the Eucharist to present her with the traditional roses that commemorate her day.

The advance of Guadalupan devotion at Notre Dame is by no means unique. Guadalupe's faithful have been expanding for nearly five centuries. Her basilica in Mexico City is the most visited pilgrimage site on the American continent. After Jesus of Nazareth, her image is the most reproduced sacred icon in America. Long acclaimed as the national symbol of Mexico, in the 1999 apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America* Pope John Paul II acclaimed her as the "Mother and Evangelizer of America," from Tierra del Fuego to the northernmost reaches of Canada. At the unanimous request of the Catholic bishops of America, he also decreed that her feast "be celebrated throughout the continent."

How does Our Lady of Guadalupe attract such a rich variety of dedicated daughters and sons? What is her power?

One answer is the tradition of her 1531 apparitions to the indigenous neophyte Juan Diego, whom Pope John Paul canonized in 2002. Devotees pass on this treasured narrative to their children. They esteem the richly poetic Nahuatl-language *Nican mopohua* account, which relates how Guadalupe sent Juan Diego to request that Juan de Zumárraga,



the first bishop of Mexico, build a temple in her honor on the sacred hill of Tepeyac. At first, the bishop doubted the celestial origins of this request, but came to believe when Juan Diego dropped exquisite out-of-season flowers from his *tilma* (cloak) and presented the image of Guadalupe that miraculously appeared on the rough cloth of his garment. In various ways, Guadalupe provided Juan Diego with hope and consolation, especially through the healing of his uncle, Juan Bernardino.

Numerous devotees resonate with the encounter between Guadalupe and Juan Diego, an encounter often reenacted during liturgical celebrations of her feast. Those who have experienced the pain of rejection find hope in Guadalupe's election of the unexpected hero Juan Diego, as well as in Juan Diego's unwavering faith and final vindication. They confess that the Guadalupe narrative is true: it reveals the deep truth of their human dignity and exposes the lie of experiences that

unjustly diminish their fundamental sense of worth.

Guadalupe's faithful also contemplate her beauty, especially her compassionate face and eyes. For numerous devotees, the core experience of Guadalupe is that of Juan Diego. In countless conversations, prayers, and sustained gazes at her image, they stand before her and relive Juan Diego's mystical encounter. Beholding their mother's countenance does not obliterate all the difficulties of daily life. But her beauty and unconditional love transform them, enabling them to confront harsh realities with the confident assurance that no human force can thwart God's loving designs.

Guadalupe is our mother. Throughout the Americas, all of us who partake in her devotions and feast day celebrations enter into the ongoing eruption of God's compassion that St. Juan Diego first experienced in her centuries ago.