

# Our Lady of Guadalupe



**The Aztec Empire** the Spaniards found in 1492 was an empire drenched with human blood. The Aztecs sacrificed 20,000 human victims a year in an effort to appease the gods of their religion, especially Quetzalcoatl, the feathered stone serpent god. Special temple dedication ceremonies increased that number to as many as 80,000 human sacrifices in four days. But the Aztecs also had premonitions that this would end. An ancient prophecy spoke of the return of the great god to the land of the Aztecs. An Aztec king had built a tower without an idol and dedicated it without human sacrifice to "the unknown God, creator of all things." In 1509, Princess Panatzin dreamt that ships with black crosses would arrive and defeat the Aztecs, bringing knowledge of the one true God. Cortés landed in Mexico on the very day predicted by the ancient prophecy. He was horrified by what he found. By 1521, the capitol city of the Aztecs had fallen, three years later the first twelve Franciscan missionaries arrived in Mexico City. By 1525, Princess Panatzin was baptized into the new faith, as was Quauhtlatoatzin, the Indian peasant who took the name Juan Diego.

**After Cortés won the land for King Charles V**, the king appointed "The First Audience," a group of five administrators headed by Don Nune de Guzmán, to administer the territory. The Church appointed the Franciscan priest Zumárraga as bishop. While Bishop Zumárraga worked hard to evangelize and educate the Aztecs, de Guzmán considered them sub-human. The First Audience exploited, enslaved, and killed thousands. When priests tried to intervene, they too were beaten or killed. The people began to rebel. Bishop Zumárraga smuggled a message in a hollowed-out crucifix to Charles V, who immediately appointed a new council, but the long sea voyage meant months would pass before the First Audience was replaced. The bishop asked Mary for help, and for Castilian roses as a sign his prayers had been heard.

**On Saturday Dec. 9, 1531**, Juan Diego was crossing Tepayac hill to go to Mass. This hill had once borne a temple dedicated to the Aztec goddess Tonatzin, unusual because she did not ask for human sacrifice. Suddenly, he heard a heavenly choir, and a woman's voice calling, "Juanito, Juan Dieguito." As he followed the voice to the top of the hill, he met a beautiful woman who called herself the Perpetual Virgin Mary, Mother of the True God. Speaking in Nahuatl, the Aztec language, she told Juan to inform the bishop that a church should be built on this hill and dedicated to her. Juan walked to the city and told the bishop, but the bishop did not believe him. As Juan returned home, he again saw the lady at Tepayac. She told him to revisit the bishop and then meet her on the hill on the evening of the next day. The following morning, he returned to the bishop. The bishop told Juan to bring a sign from the woman and sent him away, but sent a few men to follow him. The searchers lost Juan in the hills so they returned and told the bishop Juan lied.

**Meanwhile, on his return home**, Juan found his uncle desperately ill. He nursed his uncle through the next day, missing his appointment with the lady. As the sun set, his dying uncle begged Juan to bring a priest to hear his confession. Juan headed back towards town, but skirted around the edge of Tepayac hill; he didn't want to be slowed down by meeting the lady. As he walked around the hill, the lady floated down to him and Juan, embarrassed, explained why he was late. She told him his uncle was cured and asked him to go to the top of the hill to collect roses there. To his surprise, he found dozens of out-of-season dew-covered roses in bloom among the frost and rocks on the hilltop. He gathered the roses in his tilma, the cactus-fiber cloak he wore, and brought them to the lady, who arranged them in the cloak for him. He returned to the bishop with the roses wrapped in his tilma and found the bishop in conversation with the new governor of Mexico, who had just arrived. When he dropped the edge of his tilma, the bishop gasped in surprise - these were Castilian roses tumbling out onto the ground! Then all the men in the room dropped to their knees at the sight of an even greater surprise: an image of the Virgin Mary had suddenly appeared, impressed upon the tilma!

**The bishop accepted the tilma** as the sign he had prayed for, and Juan returned home to find his uncle had indeed been cured by a beautiful woman who called herself "The Lady Teccoatlatlopeuh," (pronounced "tekwetlasupe," which sounded to the Spaniards like "de Guadalupe"). This Nahuatl word means the Lady "who crushes the stone serpent." Quetzalcoatl, who demanded human sacrifice, was the stone serpent god. Within ten years, 10 million pagan Aztecs either made pilgrimage to the image or heard the descriptions of those who had, and accepted Christianity in the largest and most rapid conversion ever recorded.

**She became the national symbol for Mexico.** On Nov 14, 1921, an attempt was made to destroy the devotion by destroying the tilma. A large bomb was concealed in flowers directly below the glass-encased tilma. It detonated during a crowded high Mass, blowing out all the windows of the cathedral, gouging up the marble and masonry, and twisting a thick bronze standing crucifix in half like clay, yet no one was seriously injured and the glass over the tilma was not even scratched. Though cactus-fiber tilmas normally rot to dust in 20 years, this one has survived a nitric acid spill and 300 years' constant handling. Microscopic examination of the image reveal that, like a photograph of a human person, the eyes of the image show micro-arterial circulation and correctly reflect the image of a room full of people, apparently those present in the room when the image was first revealed in 1531.

# How to Read the Symbol of Mexico



**The Aztecs had no written language**, but they read the meaning in pictures and symbols just as we read newspapers. This image told the Aztecs volumes. The woman stands in front of the sun, and is therefore greater than their sun god Huitzilpochtli. She stands upon the moon, and is therefore greater than the moon god, Tezcatlipoca. She is held aloft by a winged person, which means she is a heavenly being, yet her hands are joined in prayer, which means there is one greater than she. The mantle's bluish-green color is reserved to Aztec divinity, yet her eyes are lowered, which means she is not a goddess herself. The sash at her waist was worn by pregnant women in Aztec culture, thus the child she carries is divine. The white fur at the neck and sleeves and the gold border are marks of royalty for the Aztecs. The stars on her mantle and the angel "carrying" her represent a new era being carried in. Touching the edge of a cloak represents a kiss, thus the angel is "kissing" the lady. The broach at her throat has the same black cross carried by Cortés and the Spanish Friars.

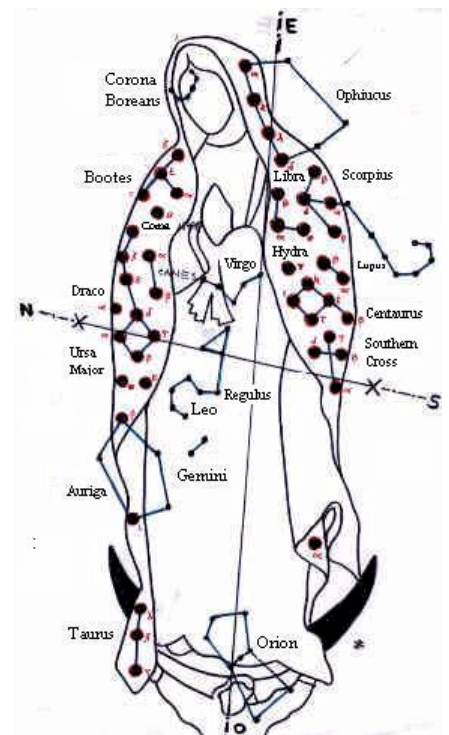
**For Aztecs, flowers represent the experience of the divine.** The single four-petalled flower over her womb is both the *quincunx* (Flower of the Sun, representing abundance; it lay at the center of the universe), and Tepeyac hill. The cross-shaped flowers are the *mamalhuaztli*, which signify new life. The nine large, triangular flowers, six below her heart, one on each sleeve and one on her bosom, are the Mexican magnolia, which symbolized the still-beating heart of human sacrificial victims. Because a pregnant woman wears them, her son is the final victim, because there are nine, the nine levels of the Aztec underworld are filled, no more human sacrifice is required. These nine flowers are also positioned so that, with the *quincunx* as Tepayac Hill in the center, the geography of the surrounding mountains is correctly represented. Because her knee is bent, and because the triangular flowers also represent "maracas," or rattles, she is seen to be dancing, and the profusion of flowers throughout her tunic represent a chorus of song. The leaf above the angel's thumb is the poinsetta leaf, called "Flower of Flesh" by the Indians, which identifies her as the fair Flower of Our Flesh.

**For Europeans, her dress and shoes** are that of a woman from the Holy Land, her hair is worn parted in the middle and under the tunic, as is common there. In the symbolic language of Eastern icon paintings, the glow around her is both the nimbus reserved for saints and a reminder of Rev 12:1, "the woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet." The moon under her feet is a sign of perpetual virginity. The red, white, and blue feathered wings of the supporting angel symbolize loyalty, faith, and fidelity, and his position beneath the woman indicates that she is above him, his queen. The blue of her mantle symbolizes eternity and human immortality. The sash, called the "cingulum," was worn by young unmarried virgins, a symbol of chastity. The whiteness of the ermine fur shows her purity, while the eight-pointed stars on her mantle represent baptism and regeneration. The stars also represent the heavens, and her role as Queen of the Heavens. Her broach symbolizes divine protection, while the leaf and rosette design on her robe recalls "I am the Vine, you are the branches" - eternal paradise.

**Because Spain was still on the old calendar**, the winter solstice in 1531 A.D. took place on Tuesday, December 12, ten days before our current reckoning. The sky map for that date at 10:30, Mexico City time, is present on the Virgin's mantle, with the constellations visible when Juan Diego showed his tilma to Bishop Zumárraga represented. The roses fell from the tilma to the floor and the Virgin's image appeared impressed on the cloth.

**The main constellations of the Northern sky** can be seen on the right of the mantle, on the left, the Southern ones, which can be seen from the Tepeyac in winter at dawn, with East at the top of the map in the Aztec style. The image is dated according to Aztec practice, at the foot and border of the image, where the three stars on the aqua color, near the woman's foot, represent the Aztec date of 13 Acatl, or 1531. The mantle is opened and there are other groups of stars which are not marked in the image, but which are present in the sky. Given their European designations, the constellations are clear: the Corona Boreans (Boreal Crown) rests upon the Virgin's head; Virgo, the Virgin, is on her chest near her hands; Leo is on Her womb (she carries the Lion of Judah), with its main star Regulus, "the little king;" Gemini, the twins, are in the region of the knees (cf. Thomas, which means Twin, the Apostle who falls to his knees on seeing and recognizing the risen Christ, saying "My Lord and my God"). Orion, the Hunter, is over the angel --we hunt for God.

**Only by uniting the Aztec and the European reading** of the image can one fully appreciate its symbolism. When division between Aztec and Spaniard threatened, proper understanding of the image required unity. She is thus a symbol of unity for Mexico and a special symbol of divine love for the Aztec people and their home, the land of Mexico.



**For more information** on reading art, get a copy of *Artfully Teaching the Faith!*