Throughout the history of Christianity in Latin America, Mary has been portrayed in multiple manifestations (e.g., Our Lady of Charity in Cuba, Nuestra Señora de la Altagracia in the Dominican Republic, and Nossa Senhora Aparecida in Brazil). In the region, she is the official patron of countries, cities, and neighborhoods; and although the Mother of Jesus is only one person, she is known by many names in Latin American devotional practices.

The paradigm of the Latin American devotion to Mary is the phenomenon of Our Lady of Guadalupe, referred to by the indigenous as Tonantzín (Our Mother) Guadalupe. The message of Our Lady of Guadalupe calls those with political and ecclesiastical power to leave their palaces, move to the periphery and stand with the poor and the marginalized. Like Jesus, her presence and those of her followers are signs of God’s healing and justice.

The Conquest and the Introduction of Mary to the People

The Guadalupe Event began in the sixteenth century, a decade following the launch of the European conquest. During the first generation of the conquest of Mexico, there was a great deal of violence within and against the indigenous people as well as against their culture and religion. Both secular and religious historians tell us that the indigenous population went from 20 million to 2 million in the sixteenth century as a result of infighting among the different indigenous groups, the diseases encountered through European contact, and, of course, the disruption and devastation of the conquest. Although there were three basic responses from the indigenous: resistance, acceptance, and indifference, “…the violence was multiple and all embracing: the brutality of the conquest, the degrading rape of the native women, the imposition of a totally new world order of the Spanish crown… and the attempts to discredit and destroy the ultimate root of the people’s life: their religion.”

From the beginning of the conquest, the mantle of Mary accompanied the conquistadors and was seen as their great protector. Following the crippling of the indigenous peoples’ social, religious, and political world, the process of acculturation and assimilation was initiated. The indigenous people began to adapt to this new worldview, which included Christianity. Evangelization in Latin America followed the pattern of empire and religious expansion employed by many cultures over the centuries and used by early Christianity in the Old World, that is: “…to Christianize pagan customs and temples and then use them.” In the New World, all too often, indigenous places of worship were destroyed or built over by the Christians, so that a crucifix or church would show the triumph and truth of Christianity over indigenous religions.

The Nican Mopohua and Nahuatl Culture

Our Lady of Guadalupe retrieved and restored the Nahua’s vital roots by
appearing to them in their own cultural lens. Thus, understanding something about Nahuatl culture and language is essential to fully comprehend the narrative of the encounter and conquest. The original Nahuatl language of the *Nican Mopohua* was poetic and symbolic as well as direct, smooth and precise. Nahuatal used what is known as *dis fasismo*, a way of communicating the most profound thought or feeling by using a complementary union of two words or symbols that expressed one meaning. Disfasismos, like poetry, intuit a different kind of knowledge and a different tool with which to access that knowledge.

The *Nican Mopohua* provides the basic elements of the narrative of Our Lady of Guadalupe's encounter a Nahua Indian named Juan Diego. The account introduced a different kind of evangelization: “…it invited the evangelized to an experience of the divine, into a mystical experience; it produced security, joy and excitement. It did not just speak about God and the teachings of God; it invited the participant into intimate contact and friendship with God through the mediation of God’s mother.”

The first encounter of Our Lady of Guadalupe is said to have occurred in 1531. In this apparition, Guadalupe took on the *rostro y corazón*—the face, the heart, and the language of the Nahua people. She affirmed those who had been vanquished, and perhaps more importantly, provided them with a way to interact and identify with the divine, giving them a place in a world that had otherwise rejected them.

The encounter of Juan Diego with Our Lady of Guadalupe was transmitted in a manner common to the Indians of that time. From person to person, community to community, the word of what had happened to Juan Diego at Mount Tepeyacac began to be told, along with the other marvels that took place in the presence of the Virgin. The recounted deeds rapidly entered into the tradition of the people. Only later, however, was the narrative written down, first in Nahuatl and then in Spanish.

**Our Lady of Guadalupe**

According to popular tradition, ten years after the conquest, on December 9, 1531, a 52-year-old native of Cuauhtitlán named Juan Diego, a recently baptized Christian, encountered Our Lady of Guadalupe on his way to Tlatelolco for religious instruction. The story describes birds singing, the land glowing, and the air filling with music. Juan thought he was dreaming because the landscape around him was as brilliant as jewels. He heard a voice calling to him: “Juanito, the smallest of my children.”

In their encounter, Mary identified herself as the mother of the “One True God for Whom One Lives.” She described herself as “the Mother of the Giver of Life, of the Creator of Persons, of the Owner of What is Near and Immediate, the Owner of Sky, the Owner of the Land.” She told Juan that she would like a little house to be built on this sacred site so that she may show forth her Son by giving her love, compassion, help and defense to those who called upon her. Through her, many in what was referred to as the New World would come to know her Son.

After walking upon the sacred hill of Tepeyacac, Juan and Our Lady shared several moments of intimacy. She honored him by telling him who she was and asked him to be part of a mission. Juan Diego’s duty was to go to Bishop Juan de Zumárraga and tell him that the Mother of the One True God for Whom One Lives desired a sacred house to be built on the hill of Tepeyacac. The place was significant—Tepeyacac was located on the periphery of the

The young face of Guadalupe, with mature eyes and a smile of compassion, reflects her inner being. Her “expression… appears reverent yet joyous, Indian yet European, olive-skinned yet white… The icon or image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is more than simply a picture. For indigenous peoples, the image contains ancient symbols that have a special meaning because they speak to the suffering of native peoples.
centers of political and religious power. Our Lady promised that if the people trusted her, loved her, and called upon her, she would listen to their pains and laments and would respond.

Juan Diego related what he had seen and heard to the bishop, who did not believe him, requesting a sign from the Lady. Juan returned home discouraged. On reaching home, he discovered that his uncle Juan was very ill. Juan Bernardino, also a Christian, realized that he was dying and asked Juan Diego to bring him a priest. Juan Diego went to find the priest, and as he approached the Mount of Tepeyacac, he took a detour, hoping that he would not have to confront the Lady. Nevertheless, she saw him, descended from the summit, and asked him: “Juan Diego, Juanito, where are you going?” Embarrassed, Juan explained his predicament and promised to return for the sign. At that point, the Lady of Guadalupe told him that his uncle would not die and said the most beautiful words in the Nican Mopohua:

Listen, be convinced in your heart, my youngest son, what frightened and afflicted you is nothing. Do not let it disturb your face and heart. Do not fear this sickness that afflicts and overwhelms.

Am I not here, I, who am your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection?

Am I not the reason for your happiness? Are you not in my lap, in the crossing of my arms? Are you in need of anything else?

Let nothing else afflict and disturb you. Do not let your dear uncle’s illness cause you anguish because he will not die of it now. Rest assured in your heart that he is already well.

(Nican Mopohua, 118–20).

Guadalupan scholars agree that these words may be regarded as the quintessential words of the Marian message, for it is here that she articulated, demonstrated, and manifested the spiritual maternity of the mother of God. With this statement of solace and the presence of her reassuring love, Juan Diego was relieved and asked what he could do. In return, she told him to climb to the summit, where he would find flowers: rosas de Castilla, or roses from Castile. (What the Nahuatl people understood as flowers of Castile would be known today as carnations.) For this community, these flowers were a religious symbol of the deepest truth. The significance of these precious flowers lies in the fact that it was December, a time of frost and cold when nothing grew on the hill of Tepeyacac. Yet with the Virgin’s presence came the transformation of that hill, rough and sterile by nature, into a garden that resembled the feathers of the great god Quetzalcoatl. Juan Diego picked the flowers and brought them back to her. She touched them and placed them in his tilma, or cloak, and instructed him not to show them to anyone but take them to the bishop.

Juan went to the bishop’s palace. Before he released the flowers from his tilma, he related to the bishop everything he saw and heard: the music, the glowing landscape, the flowers, and his encounter with Our Lady. Guadalupan tradition states that at the moment when Juan Diego released the carnations, the image of the Virgin was miraculously imprinted on the tilma. Tradition then tells us that the bishop immediately fell on his knees, asked for forgiveness, rose, untied the cloak from Juan Diego, and placed it in his personal chapel. From that moment, in accordance with the Virgin’s preference, Bishop Juan de Zumárraga of Mexico, and others in positions of political and religious power, were asked (as they are today) to leave their centers of power and stand with the poor and the marginalized.

According to oral tradition, the imprinting of Our Lady’s image on Juan Diego’s tilma occurred on December 12, 1531. However, it is also said that the miracle took place on the first day of the Winter Solstice, which was December 22, 1531. It is on this date that “according to Aztec cosmology marked the triumph of the sun over the darkness on their calendar year.”

The Symbolism of the Image on the Tilma

The icon or image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is more than simply a picture. For indigenous peoples, the image contains ancient symbols that have a special meaning because they speak to the suffering of native peoples. The young face of Guadalupe, with mature eyes and a smile of compassion, reflects her inner being. Her “expression… appears reverent yet joyous, Indian yet European, olive-skinned yet white… It is a face that intermingles the Christianity of Byzantine Europe with the overpowering naturalism of New World Indian; a fitting symbol for all the peoples of the great continent…”

Mary’s hands are not poised in the traditional Western style of prayer, but in an Indian manner of offering, indicating that something is to come from her. Adding the gold and fur trappings of royalty makes it clearer that Guadalupe is an important figure, almost divine. Her pregnancy is indicated both by the position of her hands and the tassel or maternity band or cinta that she wears around her waist. Below the tassel there is a small flower called nagvioli, which to the Nahuatl was a symbol of the sun god. Other significant aspects of the image are the stars, the gold sun rays, the moon, and the angel. Each of them relates directly to some aspect of Aztec divinity. Guadalupe’s being carried
by an angel also relates her to Aztec divinity because royalty and representatives of the deities were carried by others.

The turquoise color of Guadalupe's mantle also connects her with Aztec divinity, and the color of her robe has been described as the color of the spilled blood of sacrifices, the color of Huitzilopochtli, the sun god who gave and preserved life. From an artistic viewpoint, the robe of Our Lady of Guadalupe is especially notable because of its unusual luminosity. This image is not simply a picture, but a story made up of a number of symbols which spoke to the Nahuatl people in the sixteenth century and still speak to twentieth-century people on two continents.

The significance of this story is twofold: (1) it was the foundation of Mexican Christianity and (2) it provided a connection between the indigenous and Spanish cultures. The gold sun rays, the moon, and the angel each relate directly to some aspect of Aztec divinity. Guadalupe is carried by an angel because royalty and representatives of the deities were carried by others.

The gold sun rays, the moon, and the angel each relate directly to some aspect of Aztec divinity. Guadalupe is carried by an angel because royalty and representatives of the deities were carried by others.

The Importance of Imagery in the Tonantzín Guadalupe Event

Mary, and in particular her manifestation as Our Lady of Guadalupe, transcends time, space, and culture because what lives within the story is that which is deeply human. Everyone is ultimately in search of satisfaction for “an unquenchable fire, restlessness, a longing, … a hunger.” Located in actual time and culture, the original Tonantzín Guadalupe experience transcends that particular time (1531) through the Mexican aesthetic of flor y canto, flower and song. That is, the original event is transmitted to and received by subsequent generations through narrative, visual images, and popular religious practice, including drama, symbol, fiesta, and other contemporary expressions. All of these live in the visceral, deeply felt dimension of traditional popular Catholicism. These practices impact people's hearts and draw people to experience their own relationships with Tonantzín Guadalupe. Thus, she becomes a vehicle for communicating God and drawing people to faith.

Every detail of her appearance held meaning for the people to whom she appeared: the rays of the sun, the standing on the moon, and the cloak of the stars all reflected the significance of the time, day, and date of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe. On Saturday, December 9, 1531, very early in the morning, Tonantzín Guadalupe appeared in the historical setting of the “post Guerra,” ten years after the conquest. For the indigenous, muy de madrugada (very early in the morning) referred not only to daybreak, but to the beginning of all time. Tonantzín Guadalupe appeared early in the morning, just as the day was coming out of darkness and night. This meaningful time delineated the Guadalupe event as foundational, equal in significance to the origin of the world and the cosmos. “Religious principles penetrated the very existence of the pre-Columbian people. Everything was under their domination: public and private life; every stage of each person's progress from birth to death; the rhythm of time; the arts and even games—nothing escaped.”

At the time of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the indigenous people were not only disenfranchised and downtrodden as a result of the conquest, but, more importantly, they felt that their gods had abandoned them. Their attitude was that there was no longer any reason to live, because everything they did, they did with special attention to what the gods
wanted. During this encounter, this manifestation of Mary associated herself with *El Verdadero Dios, por Quien se Vive* (The True God for Whom One Lives). This expression is one of the names that the Nahua gave to their gods. When Tonantzín Guadalupe stated that she was from the One True God, the God Who Gives Life, the Nahua recognized this God to be their God. Thus, the encounter with Our Lady of Guadalupe restored in the Nahua people a reason to hope and to live.

The Nahuatl god (Ometeotl) was a god of duality, both masculine and feminine. This god was known by many titles: the Creator of All, the god who gives Life, etc. The identification of Guadalupe with phrases that paralleled the name of their gods was restorative for them as a people. This restoration acted as an empowerment of the people, with a power grounded in something greater than themselves, a power not over someone but having power with someone. This power and dynamism was centered on mutuality, trust, participation and regard as evidenced in the narrative of Guadalupe in the *Nican Mopohua*.

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that devotions to Mary in Latin America throughout history have been powerful precisely because of their female representation of the divine. Unlike indigenous understandings of God, which contained both male and female attributes, the West has excluded the Marian attributes in its mainline perceptions of God. This resurrection of the female image of God migrated and attached itself to the figure of Mary, lending itself to a powerful, affectively-charged presence and fulfillment of divine intimacy.

**Conclusion**

In *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer provide evidence that many historical peasant movements throughout Latin America (e.g., Peru, Brazil, Bolivia) were "stimulated by the peoples' love for the virgin who struggles with them for their liberation." An example of this was seen in the peoples' devotion to *La Purísima* (Immaculate Conception) in Nicaragua during the Sandinistas’ struggle against the Somoza regime. In El Salvador, the same love of the people for Mary led Archbishop Oscar Romero (now Blessed) to say, “The true homage a Christian can pay the Virgin, is, like her, to make the effort to incarnate the life of God in the trials of our transitory history.”

In all of these Latin American Marian expressions and manifestations, or encounters with Mary, the spirituality invoked speaks to a yearning, a hope transcending circumstances, and an experience of accompaniment within a world that often rejects and marginalizes.

In all of these Latin American Marian expressions and manifestations, or encounters with Mary, the spirituality invoked speaks to a yearning, a hope transcending circumstances, and an experience of accompaniment within a world that often rejects and marginalizes. Mary is hope, mother, protector, comforter, and mercy. In Latin America, “It is crucial to recognize what kind of human experience devotion to Mary or relationship with her is. In other words, we must ask to what kind of yearnings, manifest or latent, our relationship with Mary, who lives in God and lives in us, belongs.” Perhaps more importantly Latin American spiritual practices teach us that devotion to Mary is, if
anything, grounded within her shared status with so many of the poor and vanquished people in the world. She is often referred to as *mujer del pueblo*, or woman of the people. Blessed Monseñor Oscar Romero said in his homily of December 24, 1978, “Mary is the expression of the needs of the Salvadorians. Mary is the expression of the anguish of those who are in prison. Mary is the pain of the mothers who have lost their children and no one knows where they are. Mary is the tenderness that one looks for in a state of anguish…”

Devotion to the Virgin Mary must be a devotion that liberates; a devotion that does not turn its back on the poor. Monseñor Romero goes on to say that we must remember the prophetic side of the Virgin and “not forget that Mary, before anything else, is the prophetic message of Christ, and that in her Magnificat, she remembers the poor and hungry.” This connection with the loving presence, with the merciful attentiveness of Mary in all of her manifestations, and with her commitment to the poor, must continue to be disseminated in our theology as well as in our sermons.

Whether we are looking at Latin America and/or its indigenous communities in particular, Marian devotions are about the heart. The heart, for these cultures, is the dynamic and active part of the person. It is what brings pilgrims from far-off places to sing to their virgin, to bring her flowers, to light the candles, to burn the incense, and dance in gratitude. In conclusion we close with the prayer recited by Pope Francis, consecrating the world to the immaculate heart of Mary:

> We celebrate in you the works of God,  
> Who never tires of looking down with mercy upon humanity…  
> We are certain that each of us is previous in your eyes  
> And that nothing of all that lives in our hearts is unknown to you…  
> Hold our life in your arms:  
> Bless and strengthen every desire for good;  
> Revive and nourish faith;  
> Sustain and enlighten hope;  
> Awaken and animate charity;  
> Guide all of us along the path of holiness;  
> Teach us your preferential love for the little and the poor,  
> For the excluded and the suffering,  
> For sinners and the downhearted;  
> Bring everyone under your protection…”

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**Our Lady of Guadalupe: Selected Bibliography**


Selected Bibliography, continued


American women.

empowering catalyst for Mexican-Guadalupe as a liberating and she reinterprets the symbol of servility and suffering. Rather, that Guadalupe is a model of dispute the common perception potent symbols. Her conclusions one of the New World’s most important reinterpretation of American women offers an second-generation Mexican-played in the development of role the symbol of Guadalupe Jeanette Rodriguez’s study of the Our Lady of Guadalupe

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Our Lady of Guadalupe

Jeanette Rodriguez’s study of the role the symbol of Guadalupe played in the development of second-generation Mexican-American women offers an important reinterpretation of one of the New World’s most potent symbols. Her conclusions dispute the common perception that Guadalupe is a model of servility and suffering. Rather, she reinterprets the symbol of Guadalupe as a liberating and empowering catalyst for Mexican-American women.

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1This essay is excerpted from a longer article, “Mary, Mother of Jesus: Consolatrice of the Americas,” in Handbook of Christianity in Latin America (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

2To access the larger scholarship related to New Conquest history, please see the following in the bibliography: Stafford Poole’s Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol 1531-1797, James Lockhart’s The Naufs After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries, Justo Gonzalez’s Christianity in Latin America: A History, or Stephanie Wood’s Transcending Conquest: Nahua Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico.


4Gebera and Bingemer, Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor, 29. See also Louise Burkhart, Before Guadalupe: The Virgin Mary in Early Colonial Nahua Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

5Ibid., 132.


8Ibid.


10We need to be mindful of the controversy surrounding the 100 years of silence in the Guadalupan tradition. Important distinctions have been made among historians and theologians between the practice of Guadalupan devotion and the belief in an apparitions narrative. See Stanford Poole, Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol 1531-1797 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), and a response: Timothy Matovina, “A Response to Stanford Poole,” Catholic Historical Review 100, no. 2 (2014): 284-291.


13Jose Luis Guerrero Rosado, Nican Mopohua: Aqui se cuenta…el gran acontecimiento (Mexico: Realidad Teoría y Practica, S.A. de C.V. Cuautitlan, Edo. De Mexico, 2003), 123.


16Rodriguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe, 45.


22Ibid.

23Ibid., 26.


25Ibid., 80.

The Symbolism and Significance of Our Lady of Guadalupe: A reflection based on the work of Jeannette Rodriguez by Judith Davis

The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe shines from the rough brown fabric of maguey cloth that cloaked her messenger, Juan Diego. This resplendent image on a humble background joins heaven and earth, God and human, woman and man, Spanish and Aztec. As the greatest of divinities and the most humble of humans encounter one another, the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe brings together God-out-there and God-among-us, reconciling opposites, abolishing stigmas of race and class. When Juan presents Our Lady's flowers to the bishop Zumárraga, the cloak that he unfolds reveals an image that speaks to each of them in his own language. The sudden spill of flowers from Juan's cloak and the instant genuflection of the bishop represent an ingathering of belief and a re-centering of consciousness for both the Nahuatl man and the Spanish prelate as together they acknowledge a miracle in the image before them.

The portrait of Our Lady of Guadalupe presents an image of divinity, radiating love and compassion and a power that overcomes oppression and exclusion, creating a new people, meztizaje, who blend the different cultures and faiths of the Old World and the New. Each element of the image imprinted on the tilma—colors, shapes, objects—represents one of her attributes, as easily recognized by the Nahuatl people as the Spanish.

Our Lady of Guadalupe stands surrounded by rays of gold, an aureole of light which originates within her and symbolizes not only royalty—as does her crown—but the sacred power of the sun, whose rays indicate the presence of the sun god, Quetzalcoatl. Gold also indicates her royal status, reflected in the edges of her mantle and the 46 stars which sparkle from its folds. (The stars are said to mark the position of the stars in the sky on the morning of 1531 when she and Juan had their first encounter.) Guadalupe stands on the moon, a reminder of the Nahuatl god of night. We see another suggestion of both royalty and divinity in the angel who supports the moon under her feet—Aztec royalty and representatives of the gods were carried by others.

The pink of Our Lady's robe or tunic may represent a dilution of the blood spilled in sacrifice to the sun god Huitzilopochtli, giver of life; pink—a combination of passion (red) and purity (white) is also associated with compassion, unconditional love and understanding. Guadalupe's tunic is covered with flowers that are outlined in gold, symbols of truth and the presence of divinity. Her mantle is turquoise, a color reserved for Omecihuatl, the great goddess of creation, and her twin/spouse who are the source of all life. She wears a kind of torque around her neck with a pendant that bears a cross at its center, a clear allusion to her Son. Like a noble indigenous woman, she wears a...
maternity band around her waist, indicating her pregnancy; just below the tassel is a small flower that symbolizes the sun god. It is clear that she bears divinity within her womb.

The head of Our Lady of Guadalupe is bowed slightly, like that of so many European madonnas, and her hands are folded in an attitude of prayer—which is also a traditional Aztec gesture of offering, “indicating that something is to come from her.” Unlike typical European madonnas, her face is not pale; it is the darker countenance of a mestiza. Her eyes are dark, too, giving her a look of love and compassion, and it is said that they reflect the images of those who look up to her. Her mouth is slightly curved in a gracious and tender smile. Her joined hands—one lighter, one darker—show the union of two cultures in one all-encompassing figure.

Deeply symbolic of the combination and reconciliation of two cultures, the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe tells a story of the restoration of human dignity in a voice once silenced and now restored…the restoration of a lost language and a way of perceiving the divine.”

Like the Woman of the Apocalypse, Our Lady of Guadalupe is “clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet.” Like Coatlicue Tonantzin, the indigenous mother of all Nahuatl gods, she is virginally pregnant; she is the Mother of the True God for Whom One Lives. She has appeared to Juan at the very break of day, a sacred time taken out of the timelessness which she shares with her Son. She has spoken from the top of a hill, a place for meeting the divine, and her voice echoes through flor y canto, flower and song, a universal and transcendent language that manifests the presence of the divine. Her image and her words continue to speak, particularly to the disenfranchised and the poor, words of understanding and support in every circumstance of their lives: “Am I not here, your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not your fountain of life? Are you not in the folds of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Is there anything else that you need?”

Deeply symbolic of the combination and reconciliation of two cultures, the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe tells a story of the restoration of human dignity in a voice once silenced and now restored…the restoration of a lost language and a way of perceiving the divine.”


2Rodriguez, Chapter 2, 27.


4Rodriguez, Cultural Memory, 23, 31.