

Finding Common Ground: Our Lady of Guadalupe

By Pamela G Thomas

It was in December of 1531—the year Halley's comet traversed the sky—when Juan Diego was on his way to Mass but stopped on Tepeyac to listen to songbirds. He heard a woman call him by name, speaking in his native language, *Nahuatl*, and beckon him up the top of the hill. She identified herself as the ever-Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God. She asked that a church be built in her honor on this hill and told him to tell the bishop about her request.

Juan followed her instructions, but met ridicule and was turned away twice. Finally, the clergy told him to furnish a sign to prove this request came from the Blessed Mother. He returned to the hilltop and begged forgiveness of the Blessed Mother because he was unworthy to complete her request, but she asked what more he could need than her support.

As to a sign, she told him to pick the beautiful roses that had bloomed, ones not familiar to the area of Tepeyac, but well-known to the European clergy as Castilian roses. He gathered up the roses in his *tilma*, his peasant cloak made of agave fibers, and returned to the bishop. When he opened his *tilma* and the flowers fell to the floor, another sign was made visible: on his cloak was the image of the Blessed Mother, Our Lady of Guadalupe.

The miraculous image that appeared on Juan Diego's *tilma* is exhibited today in the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City. If one remembers the narrative and explores the symbols in this image, they provide an opportunity to not only pray with Our Lady, but to seek her prayers for our intentions.

Her appearance and reassuring words were important to Juan Diego and many others who had suffered the violence of war and conquest.

For am I not here – I, your Mother? Are you not in the cool of my shadow, in the breeziness of my shade? Is it not I that am your source of contentment? Are you not cradled in my mantle, cuddled in the crossing of my arms? Is there anything else for you to need?

She spoke of the hallow of her mantle, a phrase that translated in *Nahuatl* as a place of protection, and the crossing of her arms, a move that defends, renews and gives life. These were words of support to a defeated people.

Just as her words carried meaning, the image on his *tilma* has been speaking for almost 500 years to people of the Americas. Its power is in its ability to be read by diverse peoples: the European, the Aztec and the emerging new culture, Mestizo, who could find common ground in the image and the words of Mary.

The image's 4-foot-8 young woman wears a dark sash around her body, a traditional fertility sash. She is pregnant, and this creative, physical condition represents fecundity. For the Christian viewer, this is a sign of the incarnation: she contains the uncontainable.

The sash wraps her rose-colored gown, filled with a stylized leaf-and-rosette design that honors the surrounding countryside; the color reflects the red rose of martyrdom and eternal paradise.

She is not an abstraction, an ideal of a woman. Creases in her gown reveal a knee bent in mid-stride. She not only requests action from Juan Diego, but affirms her own participation: her compassion — her ability to hear the needs of others and respond. Theologian Jeanette Rodriguez wrote, "She gives them not the will to suffer under injustice, but the will to continue the struggle." Others see her movement as an affirmation of the power of the pilgrimage, the journey of the faithful in solitude or in community to seek a resolution to the struggles of life.

A mantle is over her gown, simple in design, not a cloak for royalty but one similar to those worn by women of the region. Its color and design connects cultures. For the European, her mantle is the heavenly blue of eternity with the eight-pointed star directing them back to baptism and regeneration. For a native, the color recalls the feathers of a highland bird used by the noble and powerful, and the 48 stars place Our Lady within reach of the powerful Aztec deities.

Two of these deities are pictured with her: the sun and the moon. Yet, the rays of the sun behind her and the moon at her feet bring the message that she is not just within reach but beyond their reach, as she is more powerful than the Aztec sun and moon. A Christian's play on words would have the rays of the sun behind Our Lady as the Son supporting the Mother. While for all peoples, the crescent moon foreshadows the cyclical movement of time, destiny, death and rebirth.

Our Lady appears youthful, reflecting a tradition that represents the purest soul with the face of a child. Her fair face is in contrast to the serious gaze of the angel that lifts her toward the heavens. He is not the pudgy cherub of the painter, Raphael; rather his determined expression creates drama and requires consideration. Even his feathers send a message. They are the colorful feathers of birds prized for ceremonies and worn to signify power and prestige.

The white feathers of the pelican, the king of all birds, the green of the quetzal used in a leader's headdress and the macaw's fiery red, all emphasize the honor of the one this angel bears. These colors — red, green and white — would become the colors in Mexico's national flag.

Returning to the crescent moon and an understanding of cycles, 1531 was meaningful to the Aztec people. Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared at the end of the old cycle of Venus and during the perfect 13th year after the arrival of the Spaniards. She appeared at a time in their life cycles when people expected something new, some change.

In Christian understanding, that something new is often explained through the scripture found in Revelation 12: "A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of 12 stars. She was pregnant and about to give birth."

Devotion and respect for this sign led Pope John Paul II to declare Our Lady of Guadalupe Patron of the Americas, under whose care we ask for protection and prayers. She stands in front of the sun and upon the moon. Many claim that she is more powerful than these ancient gods, but she is not the one to be worshiped.

She gently stands inclined, with respect, for the one who is more powerful than her, for the one whose call she answered.