Virgin of Guadalupe

On December 8, 1531, the legend goes, the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac north of Mexico City. In 1999, Pope John Paul II proclaimed Our Lady of Guadalupe the Patron Saint of the Americas. Devotion to the tradition of Guadalupe has been sustained for nearly 500 years and has played a significant role in Mexican history, whether as a symbol for independence, the Church’s resistance to political intervention, the rights of native populations, or for social conservatism and control. Although contentious debates over the historical credibility of the apparition narrative mark the Guadalupan tradition, the image and legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe have provided a powerful symbol for Mexican nationalism, and by the twentieth century, a symbol of freedom for oppressed native peoples and agrarian reform. As a symbol fusing religion and politics, native and Christian images, the Virgin of Guadalupe, patron saint of the Americas, remains a complicated symbol embodying conquest, pre-Columbian earth goddesses, nature, the modern nation, and various, complicated social relations.

The first account of the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe was not published until the mid-seventeenth century. This account tells the story of Guadalupe’s appearance in December 1531 to Juan Diego, a poor Christianized native. Speaking to him in the Aztec language of Nahuatl, she asks Juan Diego to tell the bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga to build a chapel in her honor at Tepeyac. After two unsuccessful visits, Zumárraga instructs Juan Diego to return with signs from the apparition. Disconsolate, Juan Diego meets the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe for the third time. Guadalupe tells Juan Diego to climb the hill of Tepeyac and gather roses and flowers as
signs for the bishop. When Juan Diego opens his cloak in front of the bishop, the roses tumble out, revealing a life-size image of Guadalupe found miraculously imprinted on the cactus-fiber cloth of his cloak. Realizing that a miracle had taken place, the bishop places the image in the cathedral for public devotion and later brings it to Tepeyac. The painted icon on what is alleged to be Juan Diego’s cloak remains the heart of the cult and tradition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, on display today in the twentieth-century basilica in Mexico City that serves as the central locus for Guadalupan devotion.

Scholars find it significant that the Guadalupan tradition was introduced thirty-five years after the conquest. Native peoples understandably resisted domination, sometimes overtly through resistance, but more commonly through ongoing practice of traditional religious beliefs and life ways. Syncretic practices that merged Christian images and ideas with local beliefs and rituals were employed as methods of proselytizing native peoples. In the case of Guadalupe, cults of Mary imported by the Spaniards merged with pre-Columbian earth deities. Tepeyac had long served as a pilgrimage site for various earth goddesses referred to collectively as Tonantzin, our “revered mother.” Early veneration of Guadalupe and pilgrimages to Tepeyac, some 16th century priests complained, only continued pre-Christian practices since native worshipers still associated her with sacred space and power coming from the earth.

Although Guadalupe may have had an early following among native peoples and been used as a means of evangelization by the Catholic church, by the seventeenth century Guadalupe became associated with the interests of Mexican-born Spaniards or Creoles. Guadalupe became championed as the American Mary, thus serving Mexican patriotism and nationalism, but also justifying the conquest. After Mexico City and
Puebla were devastated by the plague in 1737, Mexico City claimed the Virgin of Guadalupe as its patron saint, and by 1754 the pope named her patroness of Mexico. In 1895 the Virgin of Guadalupe was crowned Queen of the Americas. During these centuries of merging religion and patriotism, it should be noted that the image of Guadalupe was not explicitly employed to champion native peoples. The Virgin of Guadalupe was important for the Catholic Church and its position in Mexican society, as well as for patriots who employed it to champion Mexican identity. In relation to policies and practices concerning native peoples and their lands however, the cult of Guadalupe was used primarily as a conservative, paternalistic, and exclusionary mechanism.

It wasn’t until the twentieth century that the image and tradition of the Virgin of Guadalupe became explicitly associated with the rights of native peoples, disenfranchised populations, and the land. Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata both used the symbol of Guadalupe during their revolutionary struggles, thus associating Guadalupe with social and agrarian reform. Peasant followers of Emiliano Zapata carried banners of Guadalupe through Mexico City following the defeat of General Victoriano Huerta in 1914. These indigenous peasants also visited Tepeyac to venerate Guadalupe who, as both earth goddess and patron saint, came to symbolize the protector of damaged land and oppressed peoples. Banners of Guadalupe regularly appeared in marches organized by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers beginning in the 1960s. Numerous contemporary Chicana artists now depict Guadalupe in ways that link her to pre-Columbian earth goddesses, thus championing both native peoples and the land. Contemporary Latina/o theologians claim that both images and fiestas demonstrate Guadalupe’s clear connection to nature. In popular religious images, the sun, stars,
moon, and nature surround Guadalupe. Daybreak on December 12, “the time of new beginnings and the rebirth of the sun” is the time of Guadalupe’s feast and celebration and a dawn song, *Las Mañanitas* is sung to her (Rodriguez, 147).

Our Lady of Guadalupe remains a contested symbol—standing at different points in history for conquest as well as indigenous rights; for earth goddesses and nature as well as the power of the nation-state.

**Lois Ann Lorentzen, University of San Francisco**

**Further Reading**

