



The Virgin of Guadalupe, Symbol of Mexico

In 1531 an apparition of Mary near Mexico City prompted many Indigenous people to convert to Catholicism. The Virgin of Guadalupe would later become a symbol of Mexican identity.

In 1521, Tenochtitlán, capital of the Aztec Empire, was besieged and overtaken by tens of thousands of Mesoamericans—rivals or subjugated peoples of the Aztec Empire—allied with a handful of Spanish conquistadors led by Hernán Cortés. As Cortés consolidated his control over the territory, one of the first measures was to ask Charles V to send a group of Franciscan missionaries to evangelize his allies. In August 1523, the

first Franciscans landed in Veracruz, a port city in east-central Mexico, and settled in Texcoco, close to the city of Tenochtitlán.

One of the missionaries, Friar Pedro de Gante, immediately recognized the need to learn Nahuatl, then the predominant language of central Mexico, in order to be able to spread the word of God. He also established several village schools where Indigenous people were instructed in newly emerging

trades. In 1536, the friars founded the College of Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, near Tenochtitlán. There, Indigenous elites were taught the seven liberal arts, Latin, medicine, and Christian doctrine—the existence of one true God and his son Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary.

The Call of the Virgin

One of the people taught by the missionaries was Cuauhtlatoatzin, “the

Apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe to Juan Diego. Fresco in the Church of San Francisco Javier in Tepotzotlán, 1756.

GRANGER/ALBUM



FROM CHAPEL TO BASILICA

THE IMAGE OF THE VIRGIN of Guadalupe was initially housed in a chapel built in 1531 on Tepeyac Hill. The site has evolved substantially over the centuries. A new chapel was built in 1556. Then, in 1709, a Baroque-style structure was built on the site that a

few decades later would be expanded with another church and a convent. A more spacious basilica was erected in 1974–76, and that is where the image is now displayed. The old basilica is now an expiatory temple dedicated to Christ the King.

Lithograph of the town of Guadalupe as viewed from a hot air balloon, circa 1869.

ALAMY/CORDON PRESS

talking eagle.” Biographical details are scarce, but he must have been born around 1474 into a humble family and lived in Cuauhtitlán, about 12.5 miles from Tlatelolco. He worked in the fields and, although married, had no children. His pious character quickly drew the attention of the Franciscans, and in 1524 he was baptized Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin. In 1529, having been

widowed, he went to live with his uncle, closer to Tlatelolco.

According to the official chronicle of

the Church of Guadalupe, on December 9, 1531, Juan Diego rose at dawn, as he did every weekend, to go to school and hear Mass in Tlatelolco. It was Saturday, still very early in the morning, when, as he crossed the Tepeyac Hill, he heard someone calling his name. At that moment, a beautiful and resplendent maiden appeared to him; it was the Virgin Mary. She asked Juan Diego to visit the bishop of Mexico, Fray Juan de Zumárraga, and urge him to build a temple in her honor on the very spot where she had made her appearance.

The Skeptical Bishop

Juan Diego made multiple visits to Zumárraga, who did not believe him and requested proof. In a new apparition—there were four in total—the Virgin urged Juan Diego to go back on the following Monday with a sign she would provide, and insist again that the bishop build her a temple. Juan Diego was unable to comply because his uncle fell ill, and he tried to avoid meeting the Virgin again by bypassing Tepeyac Hill. But the Virgin came down to him, assuring him that his uncle was already cured. She then ordered him to climb to the top of the hill, cut some flowers, and take them to the bishop. Although the winter season seemed an unlikely time for flowers, Juan Diego found a large number of fragrant blooms and gathered them in his tilma, the cotton blanket traditionally worn around the shoulders.

As soon as the Franciscans arrived in Mexico in 1523, they began their evangelizing work.

Wood carving of Our Lady of Guadalupe, 19th century.
Dallas Museum of Art

ALBUM





ALTAR OF THE OLD BASILICA of Our Lady of Guadalupe, reformed in the Neoclassical style in the 20th century and now an expiatory temple dedicated to Christ the King.
ROBERT WYATT/ALAMY/CORDON PRESS

When he arrived before the bishop, Juan Diego opened his tilma and the flowers fell to the ground, miraculously revealing the image of the Virgin imprinted on the inside of the garment. The miracle finally convinced Bishop Zumárraga, who granted the Virgin's request and ordered a small chapel to be built on Tepeyac Hill. On the day of

the building's inauguration, the tilma bearing the sacred image, which had remained in the bishop's house until then, was carried in a procession to the site, accompanied by church and civic authorities and a large crowd of the faithful. It was a festive ceremony, with dances and theatrical performances. During the ceremony, another

miracle occurred when the Virgin saved the life of an Indigenous man who had been accidentally wounded by an arrow.

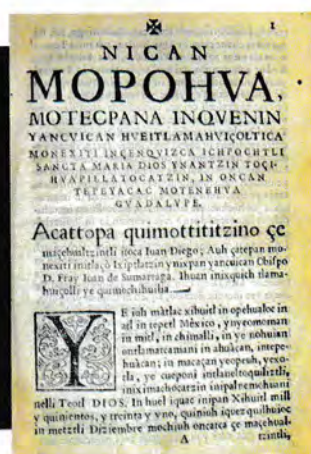
An account of the apparitions of the Virgin of Guadalupe, as she would soon come to be known, appears in a document known as *Nican Mopohua*, written in the Nahuatl language using the Latin alphabet. Although it was unsigned, it

was almost certainly written by a native Nahuatl speaker. Substantial evidence points to it being the work of Antonio Valeriano, an Indigenous nobleman born between 1522 and 1526. Valeriano was a student at the College of Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, where he stood out for his erudition. He may have written the *Nican Mopohua* around 1556, motivated by the fast-growing popularity of the Virgin of Guadalupe among the Indigenous people. The work

HERE IT IS TOLD...

THE STORY of the apparitions was first printed in Nahuatl and widely published in 1649 in an anonymous account called *Nican Mopohua* ("Here it is told"), included within a larger book about the Virgin of Guadalupe entitled *Huei Tlamahuiçoltica* ("The Great Event") by Luis Lasso de la Vega, chaplain of the Guadalupe shrine.

The first page of the *Nican Mopohua* in Nahuatl. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS





The procession of the Virgin of Guadalupe, by Mexican artist José Juárez. Museum of the Basilica of Guadalupe
DEA/ALBUM

MARY'S MEXICAN MIRACLE

THE TRANSFER OF THE VIRGIN of Guadalupe to her first chapel in Tepeyac on December 26, 1531, was a momentous event. This painting from 1653 shows that over 100 years on, the event was still seen as highly significant. In the background, a procession of Indigenous people is depicted crossing a causeway over the

lagoon of Tenochtitlán. They are carrying the Virgin under a canopy, while others re-create a naval battle. On the left, one participant is accidentally wounded, but the Virgin intervenes with a miracle to save him from death. The Indigenous people and Spaniards then make their way to the chapel.

is one of the most influential texts of the Spanish imperial period.

Religious Syncretism

The Virgin of Guadalupe's appeal had much to do with the way in which Indigenous and Christian traditions were interwoven around her. It is no coincidence that the apparitions occurred on or around Tepeyac Hill, a sacred place for the ancient Nahuatl people of central Mexico. It was here that they worshipped the goddess Tonantzin, which means "Our Little Mother" and who, like the Virgin, answered the prayers of her faithful and protected them. The Spanish clergy were aware of these practices and saw the value of erecting a chapel on the site to encourage the transition to Christian worship by the Indigenous population. This syncretistic approach had the support of Alonso de Montúfar:

archbishop of Mexico between 1554 and 1572. But there was also opposition, and some Spanish clergy made no secret of their aversion to the cult of "Tonantzin" Guadalupe. Meanwhile, it is worth emphasizing that the Marian apparitions experienced by Juan Diego closely resemble those in other parts of the Christian world, particularly in Spain, such as those of the Virgin of Candelaria in Tenerife or the Virgin of Los Milagros in Soria. The Marian apparition of the 13th century in the town of Guadalupe in Extremadura, Spain, was one that resonated with some conquistadors, and their devotion to the Madonna of Extremadura undoubtedly added impulse to the new cult of the Virgin in Mexico.

Mexican Myth

The Virgin of Guadalupe attracted both Indigenous converts and Creoles, as

Spaniards born in Mexico were known. The *Virgen Morena* (dark-haired, brown-skinned) was distinctly Mexican, not an import from the Old World, and this identity gained new importance during the Mexican Revolution. In 1810, Roman Catholic priest and revolutionary leader Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla issued a call to arms known as the Grito de Dolores, which began with "Long live our Holy Mother of Guadalupe." Hidalgo then took a banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe hanging in the Sanctuary of Atotonilco and lifted it before the insurgents.

Popular fervor for the Virgin is alive to this day. Every December 12—when she last appeared to Juan Diego—millions flock to her basilica in Mexico City, in what is the largest Catholic pilgrimage in the Americas.

—Isabel Bueno