

Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

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Introduction

As I reflect on the many conversations I have enjoyed during my investigation of Guadalupe, I envision all the women I have encountered. Women from different geographical locations – from El Salvador to Guatemala to Mexico, to the southwestern United States and up to the western/Pacific Coast. Individuals from different lifestyles—single, married, students, farm workers, CEO's, teachers, social activists; those who maintain their ties to the Church yet feel abandoned by it.¹

This essay will set the context, review the significance of the Guadalupan message, explore the importance of affectivity in preserving the cultural memory of the Guadalupan experience, share three specific vignettes of the ongoing unexpected encounters with Guadalupe, and conclude with key terms in order to appreciate the icon.

Historical Context

The Nican Mopohua, variously translated as “Here it is told” or “In good order and careful arrangement,” recounts the story of Guadalupe. This document is a narrative of the Nahuatl people, published in 1649 by Luis Lasso de la Vega (chaplain of Guadalupe from 1646 to 1656). It is situated ten years after the Spanish conquest of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

The protagonist in the Nahuatl narrative is a 52-year-old Christianized indigenous person named Juan Diego. The story takes place on a Saturday morning, December 9, 1531. As Juan Diego is on his way to catechetical instruction, he passes over the hill of Tepeyac, the ancient

site of the great earth goddess Tonanzin. (Tonanzin signifies “mother” in the Nahuatl narrative). As he passes over this mount, he hears beautiful music. Following this music, he encounters a woman who speaks to him, not in the language of the con-quistadors, but rather in the language of his people.

She says to him “Juan Diego, the smallest of my children, where are you going?” It must have been something about her that he recognized, because the story says that he falls on his knees and says to her, “I’m going to your house, in order to hear of the divine things our priests tell us.” Tonanzin-Guadalupe responds:

Know and understand, you the smallest of my children, that I am the holy virgin Mary, mother of the true God, por quien se vive, for whom one lives. I have a great desire that there be built here a casita so that I may present him forth with my love, my compassion, my help and defense to you, to all of you, to all the inhabitants of this land, to all who call upon me, trust me and love me. I will heal your pains, your sorrows, and your lamentations, and I will respond.²



The Significance of Guadalupe

In my early work on Guadalupe, I sought to make credible not just the insights of Mexican-American women, but to place on the theological table the discussion of Guadalupe as a credible theological source. Discourse about her is significant not only in the category of popular religion, but revelation and grace as well. Christianity is expressed in “a living conversation between the human and the divine that goes on generation after generation.” Guadalupe devotees assume an active and living conversation with Guadalupe. This conversation is passed on from generation to generation, from parent to child, from catechist to believer, from teacher to student, from sister to sister.

Cognitively, the significance of Guadalupe is her response to the deepest instincts of the Mexican psyche; her iconography contains symbols the indigenous encounters, understanding, and honors. The titles Guadalupe used to introduce herself in the official account of the Nican Mopohua—*Mother of the God of Truth*, the *Mother of the Giver of Life*, the *Mother of the Creator*, the *Mother of the One who makes the sun and the earth*, the *Mother of the One who is near*—coincide with the names given the ancient Mexican gods.³ The five names of the gods were well known to the Nahuatl people. Guadalupe stated who she was and where she came from, utilizing what the Nahuatl understood to be the operative essence as well as the cosmological and historical dimensions of their gods. Affectively, Guadalupe speaks and touches the deepest beliefs and longings of the human heart: the desire and need to be seen, heard, understood, accepted, embraced.⁴

But Guadalupe represents even more than compassion, relief, and a means of reconciliation between different groups of people. By identifying herself as “Mother of the true God through whom one lives,” Guadalupe connects herself with the supreme creative power, that is, the creative and creating presence. She is a symbol of a new creation, a new people.⁵

The drama of Guadalupe addresses a deep need for dignity and restoration of self—a self that reflects the image and likeness of the Creator. The Guadalupe encounter speaks of unconditional love and a people’s place in salvific history. Perhaps most significantly, it affirms a need to experience the maternal face of God.

This maternal face of God is partly made visible by the key words Guadalupe uses: she is here to demonstrate all of her love, compassion, help, and defense; she hears and heals all of our laments, miseries, and sufferings. Initially, she does not bring her presence or message to the center of power and domination, but to the poor and abandoned.

How This Message Speaks to Us Today

Wherever there are crucified peoples and pharaohs standing on the necks of the oppressed, there will be a need to hear the significant message of Guadalupe. From the midst of the poor comes our call to conversion and faith. To believe in Guadalupe is to believe in the poor and the God who stands among them.

The Guadalupe message then and now calls for response: a response of faith, conversion, and participatory transformation. Her encounter is a moment in which God, who is both father and mother, addresses us directly and invites us to let our hearts be moved toward healing, reconciling, sustaining, and loving.

Affectivity and Cultural Memory

Dealing with matters of the heart means dealing with affectivity. Feelings and emotions carry with them distinct insights and particular worldviews. Cultural memories are manifested in affectivity, ideas, aspirations, beliefs,

and stories. Historical memory tends to be constructed to support those in power. Cultural memory can either support the dominant culture or, as with Guadalupe, subvert it by empowering the marginalized cultures.

Cultural memory has a historical basis; it can be transformative. It has the power to influence human life. Cultural memory transmits an experience rooted in history that has reached a culturally definitive transformative status. The myth/story of Guadalupe is a cultural memory because it “enshrines the major hopes and aspirations of an entire society.”⁶

The memory of Guadalupe is carried and transmitted in the stories Latina women share, in the devotions that express their faith in her, and in their celebrations of her. Their remembering and evoking is mainly a matter of feelings and aspirations, of searching for hope and strength. A memory like Guadalupe is carried by a people in their historical, social, and political world. This memory of Guadalupe passes on the values of self-worth and appreciation of one’s own language, culture, and tradition.

Three Vignettes

Stories are guideposts for our thinking, reflection and dialogue. Stories invite the “other” into our own process of theological reflection, deepening the conversation. Listening to Latina’ “greatest story ever told” (not of Jesus primarily, but of Guadalupe) and the impact Guadalupe has had on their lives and the lives of their mothers has supported my desire for a deeper conversation internally as well as interpersonally. Scripture tells us that when people encountered Jesus, they were changed, transformed, and led their lives differently. Encounters with Guadalupe have the same effect. Like Jesus, she incarnates God’s unconditional love and demonstrates the power to transform.⁷

It makes sense that Guadalupe would impact the people from which she originated. The transformation from the Nahuatl has gone beyond its culturally meditated context to the lives of others. The following are three examples:

Vignette 1

In the late 1980s I received a phone call from a young man who belonged to *Dignity*, a group of gay/lesbian Roman Catholics. They had heard that I gave a presentation on the maternal face of God and they were hungry to see this face, as they no longer felt that the God of their tradition could welcome or embrace them. I went to their group meeting and shared with them the story, symbology, and the message of Guadalupe. I was deeply touched by the faith of these men and women who so loved the Church, who felt called to ministry, and who felt that what they loved the most was rejecting them because of their sexual orientation.

One way of identifying a true religious experience is recognizing that it is liberating. The message of Guadalupe was liberating for these men and women because it was a message of acceptance, embrace, belonging, hope and direction. They felt, once again, loved. They felt that, although rejected by the dominant culture, they were divinely embraced, which gave them a

place and a mission in the world. As one member of the group stated, "I've felt so alone, so abandoned even by God. But now, knowing that my mother is with me, I can begin the journey of self-expression."

Vignette 2

In 1994 I met a Spanish-speaking Jewish woman involved with the Latino community as a community organizer. She had demonstrated years of commitment and service to the Latino community. I have met many Euro-American women committed to our cause, but rarely have I met one who claims to be a "Guadalupana." In her own words, here is how she described her devotion to Guadalupe.

I didn't grow up with any spiritual (life). My father

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considered himself to be quite a rebel. On his side of the family there were six generations of rabbis. My mother's great-great grandfather was a Talmudic scholar. I was born in Chicago where there was a large Jewish community but I never was allowed to participate in Hebrew school or temple. I had no religious community, no cultural connections.

My earliest recollections of Guadalupe were with the farm workers union. I was getting more involved with the Latino community and became aware of the fact that little was going on in terms of community organizing. However, this community managed to get itself organized to raise enough money to celebrate Guadalupe. For me, Guadalupe became a symbol of my commitment to this community! Every year when I celebrate it is a renewal of some kind of bond and commitment to the work I do, through her. She also represents a sort of a feminine kind of loving energy. Through her I connect to something bigger. Through her I experienced something very powerful and creative. She becomes the protectress of my creativity and my bond to the people.⁸

Vignette 3

In 1990 I was invited to give a presentation on Guadalupe at the National Association of Lay Ministers (NALM) conference held in Phoenix. It was the first time I would

present my work on Guadalupe to an audience that was Euro-American, educated, critical and ecclesiologically engaged.

I set the tone of the presentation by providing the historical context of great desperation, pain, and suffering out of which this apparition comes. I focused on the destruction of a people, as well as on the healing message of Guadalupe. I emphasized the need to be sensitive to another culture's experience. What I experienced at the NALM conference was the participants' openness to this story not because it was a different story, but because at the very heart of the story is something that is deeply human.

From the responses of some of the participants I learned that they, as lay ministers in the Roman Catholic Church, felt like Juan Diego. They felt like they had been called, that they had been asked to "go to places where I do not belong." It was amazing to me that they were able to identify with Juan Diego. They identified with him out of a context that I did not even think of- being a lay person committed to ministry in the Roman Catholic Church. Their encounter with Guadalupe not only gave them an experience of a divine presence that accepts them, but one that calls them to mission, a mission that involves standing with the poor and the marginalized. In essence the encounter gave them standing in their own lives!

Important Terms to Understand the Narrative of Guadalupe

The Nahuatl Language: Up to the 16th Century, it was spoken and expressed with pictograms.

Coatlicue Tonantzin: She is the mother of all gods. Virginally she gets pregnant with humming bird feathers. Her son was Huitzilopochtli. Goddess of the ground that provides food to all; she governs life and death.

Dawn: For the Aztecs, it was the most important time of the day because the God Sun is born every morning.

Song of Birds, Flowers and Color: Elements of divine communication; God's gifts for all. The expression: "in xochitl in cuicatl" (flora y canto; flower and song), was the language that started the way of talking with the Creator.

The Tops of Hills: Places where you meet God.

References

1. Rodriguez, Jeanette, "Contemporary Encounters with Guadalupe," Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, August 1997, Vol. 5, No. 1).
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8.Taped Interview with Hanna, California, October 1996.

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The feast day for Our Lady of Guadalupe is celebrated on December 12. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

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Prayer Service Honoring Our Lady of Guadalupe

Celebrate Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12 or at any other time

If possible have a large painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe, either the face or the whole image prominently displayed. Include a large basket of roses nearby. As people gather, have sacred music playing in the background (perhaps hymns to Mary in Gregorian chant or Schubert's Ave Maria). If both latino and anglo people are present make sure that both serve as readers or cantors.

Welcome: Presider welcomes participants and makes sure people are introduced.

Opening Song Ave Maria (©1995 Text and musical adaptation by Paul Ford, in Today's Missal Music Issue, OCP publications) If possible, sing in Latin.

First reader: ...the significance of Guadalupe is that she responds to the deepest instincts of the Mexican psyche; her [image] contains symbols indigenous [people] encounter, understand and honor. The titles Guadalupe used to introduce herself in the official account...Mother of the God of Truth, the Mother of the Giver of Life, the Mother of the Creator, the Mother of the One who makes the sun and the earth, the Mother of the One who is near coincide with the names given the ancient Mexican gods. ...Guadalupe speaks and touches the deepest beliefs and longings of the human heart; the desire to be seen, heard, understood, accepted and embraced.(Dr. Jeannette Rodriguez: Our Lady of Guadalupe essay in More! Celebrating Women Witnesses)

Sung Response: *Gentle woman, quiet light, morning star, so strong and bright, gentle Mother, peaceful dove, teach us wisdom, teach us love* (©1978 Carey Landry and NALR in Today's Missal Music Issue, OCP)

Second reader: But Guadalupe represents even more than compassion, relief, and a means of reconciliation between different groups of people By identifying herself as "Mother of the true God through whom one lives," Guadalupe connects herself with the supreme creative power, that is, the creative and creating presence. She is a symbol of a new creation, a new people. The drama of Guadalupe addresses a deep need for dignity and restoration of self - a self that reflects the image and likeness of the Creator. The Guadalupe encounter speaks of unconditional love and a people's place in salvific history. Perhaps most significantly, it affirms a need to experience the maternal face of God. This maternal face of God is partly made visible by the key words Guadalupe uses: she is here to demonstrate all of her love, compassion, help, and defense; she hears and heals all of our laments, miseries and sufferings. Initially, she does not bring her presence or message to the center of power and domination, but to the poor and abandoned.(Dr. Jeannette Rodriguez: Our Lady of Guadalupe essay in More! Celebrating Women Witnesses)

Sung Response: *Gentle woman, quiet light, morning star, so strong and bright, gentle Mother, peaceful dove, teach us wisdom, teach us love*

Third Reader: (a reading from Archbishop Oscar Romero) "For the church, abuses of human life, liberty and dignity are a heartfelt suffering. The church, entrusted with the earth's glory, believes that in each person is the creator's image and that everyone who tramples it offends God ... The church takes as spittle in its face, as lashes on its back as the cross in its passion, all that human beings suffer, even though they be unbelievers. They suffer as God's images. There is no dichotomy between [humankind] and God's image. Whoever tortures a human being, whoever abuses a human being, whoever outrages a human being, abuses God's image and the church takes as its own that cross, that martyrdom.(from *The Church is All of You: Thoughts of Archbishop Oscar Romero* by James R. Brockman, S.. Winston Press, Minneapolis, ISBN:086683-838-4 p.20)

Sung Response: *Gentle woman, quiet light, morning star, so strong and bright, gentle Mother, peaceful dove, teach us wisdom, teach us love.*

Gospel: A reflection on The Visitation Luke 1:39-56 (from the *The Gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentiname*, edited by Philip and Sally Scharper, Orbis, 1984)

ERNESTO: "The pregnant Mary had gone to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who also was pregnant. Elizabeth congratulated her because she would be the mother of the Messiah, and Mary broke out singing:" *My soul praises the Lord, my heart rejoices in God my Savior.*

ESPERANZA: "She praises God because the Messiah is going to be born, and that's a great event for the people. She calls God 'Savior' because she knows that the Son that he has given her is going to bring liberation."

ANDREA: "She recognizes liberation ...We have to do the same thing. Liberation is from sin, that is,

from selfishness, from injustice, from misery, from ignorance-- from everything that's oppressive. That liberation is in our wombs too, it seems to me..."

And from now on all generations will call me happy.

OLIVIA: "She says that people will call her happy ... She feels happy because she is the mother of Jesus the Liberator, and because she also is a liberator like her son, because she understood her son and did not oppose his mission,"

He has shown the strength of his arms; he conquers those with proud hearts.

Old TOMAS: (who can't read but always talks with great wisdom): "They are the rich, because they think they are above us and they look down on us, since they have the money ... And a poor person comes to their house and they won't even turn around to look. They don't have anything more than we do, except money. Only money and pride, that's all they have that we don't."

ANGEL: "I don't believe that's true. There are humble rich people and there are proud poor people. If we weren't proud we wouldn't be divided, and we poor people are divided."

GLORIA: "She spoke for the future, it seems to me, because we are just barely beginning to see the liberation she announces."

WILLIAM: "But the people can't be liberated by others. They must liberate themselves. God can show the way to the Promised Land, but the people themselves must begin the journey."

Gospel Response: *Proclaim the greatness of God; rejoice in God, my savior! Rejoice in God, my Savior!* (©1980 James J. Cheponis, GIA Publications. As found in *Gather*, #127)

Reflection/Action Prayer leader invites all to sit silently and reflect about what the readings mean to them. The following questions may be helpful:

1. *What would the world be like if we all acted as if we were truly made in God's image?*
2. *What does "liberation" mean for me personally?*
3. *How is it for me to hear about "the maternal face of God?"*

After about fifteen minutes, invite each person to take a rose from the basket and briefly share the fruits of their reflection. If the reflection needs to stay private, simply invite the person to take a rose and stand in silence. As each person finishes, all raise their right hand in blessing and say: "**Blest are you, who believe that God's Promise will be fulfilled**" If the group is large, ask people to share their understandings in two or three words or sentences only.

Closing Prayer: (All) Mother of the true God through whom we live: Thank you for showing us your compassionate face. Thank you for showing us that unconditional Love both lives within and transcends the cultures of our world. Help us to love one another. Help us to know in the deepest part of ourselves that we too are made in God's image. Help us to treat all of earth's peoples as made in God's image too. Thank you for your Child Jesus, the one who liberates, the one through whom we also live and move and have our being. Amen.

Closing Song: *God Beyond All Names* (© 1990 Bernadette Farrell in *Today's Missal Music Issue* OCP Publications) or *Mother and God* (Miriam Therese Winter as found in *Songlines* and *Woman Prayer, Woman Song* available from Medical Mission Sisters mms@hartsem.edu 860-233-0875 permission granted for one time use.)

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