

# Beyond Borders

Writings of Virgilio Elizondo  
and Friends

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## ESSAYS BY VIRGILIO ELIZONDO

### 5. Our Lady of Guadalupe as a Cultural Symbol

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Nowadays we realize that religious symbols which the theologian has labeled as "popular" religion and has looked upon as a species of pagan practice do not have to be rejected, but reinterpreted. In past decades the tendency of rational theology was to consider symbols as fantasies, to underline their ambiguity, and therefore to speak of them only in negative terms. This leads to an opposition between the religion of the people, which is not looked upon as true faith, and faith in Christ, which appears as the religion of the intellectual elite. A closer view of reality leads to a different understanding.<sup>1</sup> Even to the theologian, popular devotion appears ambiguous; nevertheless, it is the way the people relate to the God of Jesus. Therefore, from the pastoral as well as from the theological point of view, we have to try to answer the following question: What is the meaning of popular symbols and how do they function in relation to the Gospel? In this article I will try to clarify the problem by considering one of the most important living symbols of the Catholicism of the Americas: Our Lady of Guadalupe.

If Our Lady of Guadalupe had not appeared, the collective struggles of the Mexican people to find meaning in their chaotic existence would have created her. The cultural clash<sup>2</sup> of sixteenth-century Spain and Mexico was reconciled in the brown Lady of Tepeyac<sup>3</sup> in a way no other symbol can rival. In her the new *mestizo*<sup>4</sup> race, born of the violent encounter between Europe and indigenous America, finds its meaning, uniqueness, and unity. Guadalupe is the key to understanding the Christianity of the New World<sup>5</sup> and the Christian consciousness of the Mexicans and the Mexican Americans of the United States.

#### Historical Context of the Apparition

To appreciate the profound meaning of Guadalupe it is important to know the historical setting at the time of the apparition. Suddenly an exterior force, the

white men of Europe, intruded on the closely knit and well-developed system of time-space relationships of the pre-Columbian civilizations.<sup>6</sup> Neither had ever heard of the other, nor had any suspicion that the other group existed. Western historiographers have studied the conquest from the justifying viewpoint of the European colonizers, but there is another perspective, that of the conquered. With the conquest, the world of the indigenous peoples of Mexico had, in effect, come to an end. The final battles in 1521 were not just a victory in warfare, but the end of a civilization. At first, some tribes welcomed the Spaniards and joined them in the hope of being liberated from Aztec domination. Only after the conquest did they discover that the defeat of the Aztecs was in effect the defeat of all the natives of their land.<sup>7</sup> This painful calvary of the Mexican people began when Cortez landed on Good Friday, April 22, 1519. It ended with the final battle on August 13, 1521. It was a military as well as a theological overthrow, for their capital had been conquered, their women violated, their temples destroyed, and their gods defeated.

We cannot allow the cruelty of the conquest to keep us from appreciating the heroic efforts of the early missionaries. Their writings indicated that it was their intention to found a new Christianity more in conformity with the Gospel, not simply a continuation of that in Europe. They had been carefully prepared by the universities of Spain. Immediate efforts were made to evangelize the native Mexicans. The lifestyle of the missionaries, austere poverty and simplicity, was in stark contrast to that of the conquistadors. Attempts were made to become one with the people and to preach the Gospel in their own language and through their customs and traditions. Yet the missionaries were limited by the socio-religious circumstances of their time. Dialogue was severely limited, since neither side understood the other. The Spaniards judged the Mexican world from within the categories of their own Spanish world vision. Iberian communication was based on philosophical and theological abstractions and direct, precise speech. The missionaries were convinced that truth in itself was sufficient to bring rational persons to conversion. They were not aware of the totally different way of communicating truth, especially divine truth, which the native Mexicans believed could only be adequately communicated through flower and song.<sup>8</sup> Even the best of the missionaries could not penetrate the living temple of the Mexican consciousness.

This was also the time of the first *audiencia* of Guzmán which was noted for its corruption and abuses of the Indians. During this period the church was in constant conflict with the civil authorities because of these authorities' excessive avarice, corruption, and cruel treatment of the natives. The friars were good men who gradually won the love and respect of the common people. However, the religious convictions of generations would not give way easily, especially those of a people who firmly believed that the traditions of their ancestors were the way of the gods. As the friars tried to convert the wise men of the Indians by well-prepared theological exposition, the Indians discovered that the friars were in effect trying to eliminate the religion of their ancestors. The shock of human sacrifices led many of the missionaries to see everything else in the native religion as diabolical, whereas the shock of the Spaniards' disregard for life by killing in war kept the Indians from seeing anything good or authentic in the conquerors' religion.

This mutual scandal made communication difficult.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the painful memory of the conquest and new hardships imposed upon the Indians made listening to a "religion of love" difficult. Efforts to communicate remained at the level of words, but never seemed to penetrate to the level of the symbols of the people, which contained the inner meanings of their world vision. For the Indians these attempts at conversion by total rupture with the ways of their ancestors were a deeper form of violence than the physical conquest itself. Christianity had in some fashion been brought over, but it had not yet been implanted. The Indians and missionaries heard each other's words but interpretation was at a standstill. Many heroic efforts were made, but little fruit had been produced. The missionaries continued in prayer and self-sacrifice to ask for the ability to communicate the Gospel.

### The Apparitions and Their Meaning

In 1531, ten years after the conquest, an event happened whose origins are clouded in mystery, yet its effects have been monumental and continuous. Early documentation about what happened does not exist, yet the massive effect which the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe had and continues to have on the Mexican people cannot be denied. The meaning of the happening has been recorded throughout the years in the collective memory of the people. Whatever happened in 1531 is not past history but continues to live, to grow in meaning, and to influence the lives of millions today.

According to the legend, as Juan Diego, a Christianized Indian of common status, was going from his home in the *barrida* near Tepeyac, he heard beautiful music. As he approached the source of the music, a lady appeared to him. Speaking in Nahuatl, the language of the conquered, she commanded Juan Diego to go to the palace of the bishop of Mexico at Tlateloco and to tell him that the Virgin Mary, "Mother of the true God through whom one lives," wanted a temple to be built at Tepeyac so that in it she "can show and give forth all my love, compassion, help, and defense to all the inhabitants of this land . . . to hear their lamentations and remedy their miseries, pain, and sufferings." After two unsuccessful attempts to convince the bishop of the Lady's authenticity, the Virgin wrought a miracle. She sent Juan Diego to pick roses in a place where only desert plants existed. Then she arranged the roses in his cloak and sent him to the bishop with the sign he had demanded. As Juan Diego unfolded his cloak in the presence of the bishop, the roses fell to the ground and the image of the Virgin appeared on his cloak.

The Mexican people came to life again because of Guadalupe. Their response was a spontaneous explosion of pilgrimages, festivals, and conversions to the religion of the Virgin. Out of the meaningless and chaotic existence of the post-conquest years, a new meaning erupted. The immediate response of the church ranged from silence to condemnation. Early sources indicated that the missionaries, at least those who were writing, were convinced that it was an invention of the Indians and an attempt to re-establish their previous religion. Yet gradually the church accepted the apparition of Guadalupe as the Virgin Mary, Mother of God.

In 1754 Pope Benedict XIV officially recognized the Guadalupe tradition by bringing it into the official liturgy of the church.<sup>10</sup>

To understand the response of Juan Diego and the Mexican people it is necessary to view the event not through western categories of thought but through the system of communication of the Nahuatl of that time. What for the Spanish was an aberration for the conquered and dying Mexican nation was the rebirth of a new civilization. The details of the image conveyed a profound meaning to the Indian peoples. In reading the legend, the first striking detail is that Juan Diego heard beautiful music, which alone was enough to establish the heavenly origin of the Lady. For the Indians, music was the medium of divine communication. The Lady appeared on the sacred hill of Tepeyac, one of the four principal sacrificial sites in Mesoamerica. It was the sanctuary of Tonantzin, the Indian virgin mother of the gods. The dress was a pale red, the color of the spilled blood of sacrifices and the color of Huitzilopochtli, the god who gave and preserved life. Indian blood had been spilled on Mexican soil and fertilized mother earth and now something new came forth. Red was also the color for the East, the direction from which the sun arose victorious after it had died for the night. The predominant color of the portrait is the blue-green of the mantle, which was the royal color of the Indian gods. It was also the color of Ometéotl, the origin of all natural forces. In the color psychology of the native world, blue-green stood at the center of the cross of opposing forces and signified the force unifying the opposing tensions at work in the world. One of the prophetic omens which the native wise men interpreted as a sign of the end of their civilization was the appearance, ten years before the conquest, of a large body of stars in the sky. The stars had been one of the signs of the end, and now the stars on her mantle announced the beginning of a new era. Being supported by heavenly creatures could have meant two, not necessarily contradictory, things. First, she came on her own and, therefore, was not brought over by the Spaniards. Second, the Indians saw each period of time as supported by a god. This was recorded by a symbol representing the era being carried by a lesser creature. The Lady carried by heavenly creatures marked the appearance of a new era. She wore the black band of maternity around her waist, the sign that she was with child. This child was her offering to the New World. The Lady was greater than the greatest in the native pantheon because she hid the sun but did not extinguish it. Thus she was more powerful than the sun god, their principal deity. The Lady was also greater than their moon god, for she stood upon the moon, yet did not crush it. However, great as this Lady was, she was not a goddess. She wore no mask as the Indian gods did, and her vibrant, compassionate face in itself told anyone who looked upon it that she was the compassionate mother.

The fullness of the apparition developed with the Lady's request for a temple. In the Indian hieroglyphic recordings of the conquest, a burning, destroyed temple was the sign of the end of their civilization and way of life. Therefore, the request for the temple was not just for a building where her image could be venerated, but for a new way of life. It would express continuity with their past and yet radically transcend that past. One civilization had indeed ended, but now another one was erupting out of their own mother soil.

Not only did the Lady leave a powerful message in the image, but the credentials she chose to present herself to the New World were equally startling. For the bishop, the roses from the desert were a startling phenomenon; for the Indians, they were the sign of a new life. Flowers and music to them were the supreme way of communication through which the presence of the invisible, all-powerful God could be expressed. As the apparition had begun with music, giving it an atmosphere of the divine, it reached its peak with flowers, the sign of life beyond life, the sign that beyond human suffering and death there was something greater-than-life in the dwelling place of the wonderful giver of life.<sup>11</sup>

The narration as it exists today does not appear to be historical, at least in the western scientific understanding of the word. It is not based on objective, verifiable, written documentation. However, it is a historical narrative to the people who have recorded their past through this specific literary genre.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, popular religion has often been too easily labeled by outsiders, especially sociologists and theologians of the dominant groups, as alienating and superstitious. Popular piety is not necessarily and of itself alienating; in fact, for a defeated, conquered, and colonized people, it serves as a final resistance against the way of the powerful. Popular religion becomes alienating when agents of religion use it to legitimize and maintain the *status quo*. However, it becomes liberating when used as a source of unity and strength in the struggle for dignity and subsequent change against the powerful of society. It is the collective voice of the dominated people crying out: "We will not be eliminated; we will live on! We have been conquered, but we will not be destroyed." In the first stages, it gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence and thus a reason for living. As the triumphant group has its way of recording history, so those who have been silenced by subjugation have their interpretation of the past. Their accounts exist in an even deeper way. For the defeated and powerless, history is recorded and lived in the collective memory of the people: their songs, dances, poetry, art, legends, and popular religion. For the powerful, history is only a written record, whereas for the defeated, history is life, for it is the memory that keeps telling them that things are not as they ought to be. This memory cannot be destroyed or opposed by the powerful because they do not understand it. Accordingly it is not surprising that in the history of Mexico there is no place for the Tepeyac tradition. Guadalupe, the most persistent influence in Mexico, is found only in the folklore and popular religious practices of the masses.

At the time of the apparition, the Spanish were building churches over the ruins of the Aztec temples. The past grandeur and power of Tenochtitlán-Tlatelolco (the original name of present-day Mexico City) was being transformed into the glory of New Spain. Juan Diego dared to go to the center of power and with supernatural authority (as the Lady commanded) demanded that the powerful should change their plans and build a temple—a symbol of a new way of life—not within the grandeur of the city, in accordance with the plans of Spain, but within the *barriada* of Tepeyac in accordance with the desires of the people. The hero of the story is a simple conquered Indian from the *barriada* who is a symbol of the poor and oppressed refusing to be destroyed by the dominant group. This story's purpose was to convert the bishop, the symbol of the new Spanish power

group, and to turn the attention of the conquering group from amassing wealth and power to the periphery of society where the people continued to live in poverty and misery.

The narration is only a wrapping for the continuing struggle of the masses for survival and liberation from the imposition of the ways of the powerful, a struggle which has been going on for nearly five hundred years. Through unceasing struggle, a dynamic tradition has emerged from the primitive story. This tradition has come to stand for the dignity, identity, unity, personal and collective emancipation, and the liberation movements of the Mexican people. Miguel Hidalgo fought for Mexican independence under the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Emiliano Zapata led his agrarian reform under her protection. César Chávez battled against one of the most powerful economic blocks in the United States under the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe and succeeded in his struggle for justice against all human odds. This tradition was relegated to the area of fable or legend not because it was lacking in historical veracity, but precisely because its living historical veracity cannot be fully accepted by the powerful political, economic, educational, sociological, or religious elite of any moment of history. The full truth of Tepeyac is the obvious disturbing truth of the millions of poor, powerless, peripheral oppressed of our society. Guadalupe's significance is the voice of the masses calling upon the elite to leave their economic, social, political, and religious thrones of pseudo-security and work with them—within the *movimientos de la base*—in transforming society into a more human place for everyone.

It was through the presence of Our Lady of Guadalupe that the possibility of cultural dialogue began. The missionaries' activity had won a basis of authentic understanding, bringing to a climax their work of pre-evangelization. As at Bethlehem when the Son of God became man in Jesus and began the overthrow of the power of the Roman Empire, at Tepeyac Christ entered the soil of the Americas and began to reverse the European domination of the people in those lands. Tepeyac marks the beginning of the reconquest and the birth of Mexican Christianity.

It is from within the poor that the process of conversion is begun. The poor become the heralds of a new humanity. This critical challenge of our compassionate and liberating mother to the powerful of any moment and place in the Americas continues today; it is the dynamic voice and power of the poor and oppressed of the Americas groaning and travailing for a more human existence. Her presence is not a pacifier but an energizer which gives meaning, dignity, and hope to the peripheral and suffering people of today's societies. Her presence is the new power of the powerless to triumph over the violence of the powerful. In her, differences are assumed and the cathartic process of the cultural-religious encounter of Europe-America begins, but it has a long way to go. Nevertheless, it has begun and is in process. This is the continuing miracle of Guadalupe—the mother—queen of the Americas. Now, the dream of the early missionaries, a new church and a New World, has definitely begun. The new people of the land would now be the *mestizo* people—*la raza*—and the new Christianity would be neither the cultural expression of Iberian Catholicism nor the mere continuation of the pre-Cortez religions of indigenous America, but a new cultural expression of Christianity in the Americas.

Today, theologians cannot afford to ignore the function and meaning of popular religion for the popular masses.<sup>13</sup> A theologian's task is not the canonization or rejection of the religious symbols of the people, but a continuous reinterpretation of them in relation to the whole Gospel. In this way popular religion will not be alienating but will help to lead people to a deeper knowledge of the saving God. It will not be alienating or enslaving, but salvific and liberating. Popular religion which is regenerated (not eliminated) by the Gospel becomes the invincible and efficacious power of the powerless in their struggle for liberation.<sup>14</sup>

For millions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans of the United States, Our Lady of Guadalupe is the temple in whom and through whom Christ's saving presence is continually incarnated in the soil of the Americas and it is through her mediation that:

He shows strength with his arm.  
He scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts.  
He puts down the mighty from their thrones,  
and exalts the oppressed.  
He fills the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he sends away empty handed.  
(Luke 1:51-52)

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For an excellent exposition of this point in relation to the popular religion of Mexico see Jean Meyer, *La Cristiada* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1974) 316-323.

<sup>2</sup>"Culture" is used here as all those solutions that a group finds in order to survive its natural and social situation. It is the complete world vision—norms, values, and rituals—of a group. Spain and Mexico had very highly developed cultures at the time of the clash.

<sup>3</sup>*Tepeyac* is the hill north of Mexico City where the sanctuary of Tonantzin (which means our Mother)—the female aspect of the deity—was located. It was one of the most sacred pilgrimage sites of the Americas. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (Mexico, written in mid-1500s) 3:352.

<sup>4</sup>*Mestizo* is the Spanish word for a person who is born from parents of different races. In contemporary Latin America it is acquiring a positive meaning and the arrival of Columbus is celebrated as the day of *la raza* (the race), meaning the new race formed of Europe and Native America. There is no English translation of this concept as the English word "half-breed" (a social rather than a biological term) is very derogatory and would have a completely different meaning.

<sup>5</sup>For the first twelve missionaries who came to Mexico, "New World" was a theological term indicating the place where the new Christianity was now to emerge. It would not be simply a continuation of the Christianity of Europe, but a new, evangelical Christianity. Silvio Arturo Zavala, *Recuerdo de Vasco de Quiroga* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1965); Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl et Guadalupe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974) 52-67.

<sup>6</sup>Some of the Native American cultures were very well developed and in many ways superior to those of the Europe of the sixteenth century. For a good description of this, see: Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963) esp. 134-176.

<sup>7</sup>Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Penguin, 1961) 93-96.

<sup>8</sup>León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* 74-79.

<sup>9</sup>Jacques Soustelle, *La Vie quotidienne des Aztèques à la veille de la conquête espagnole* (Paris: Hachette 1955).

<sup>10</sup>For a good description of the development of the Guadalupe tradition, see Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl et Guadalupe* 281-396.

<sup>11</sup>León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* 102.

<sup>12</sup>For a good example of a scholar who has been able to penetrate the historical consciousness alive in the folklore of the people, see: Nathan Wachtel, *La Vision des vaincus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

<sup>13</sup>Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), sections 48 (on popular piety) and 63 (on adaptation and fidelity in expression). See also Meyer, *La Cristiada* 307, which brings out the false way that North American and European missionaries have judged Mexican Catholicism.

<sup>14</sup>Meyer, *La Cristiada* 275-323.