17. Our Lady of Guadalupe: 
Influence of the Mestizo Icon 
on Mexico and the Catholic Church

Steven A. Kiczek

The icon and devotion of Our Lady of Guadalupe (Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe) is a good example of the influence of the indigenous peoples of Latin America on the rest of the world. This devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe has exercised a strong influence on many people, especially Mexicans. At the heart of the devotion are the Nahua Indian “Juan Diego” and the message he brought to his people. This study is divided into four main topics: the material devotion, consisting of the icon itself and the devotional version of its history; the controversy over its origins; its influence on the history and culture of Mexico; and its influence on the Catholic Church. In this paper the phrases “Our Lady of Guadalupe” and “Virgin of Guadalupe” stand for the devotion in its widest sense, encompassing the image, the devotion and its message.

History of the Icon and its Devotion

There are three elements of Our Lady of Guadalupe that are separate yet interrelated: the image itself; the cultus or veneration rendered to the image; and the story of the appearance of the Virgin Mary to Juan Diego as depicted in various sources, especially the Nican mopohua (Here Is Recounted). The picture of the Virgin Mary is an icon. Since the Second Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (787), the Catholic Church has officially permitted the veneration, though not worship, of images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the angels and saints, since the images point to and direct the minds and hearts of the faithful to their prototypes. This is an important point in the history of the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, since the first opposition to the devotion was raised by the first Franciscan missionaries in New Spain who were very worried that devotion to the image on the part of the new indigenous converts would lead to idolatry.

The image is a depiction of the Virgin Mary as a mestiza woman almost completely surrounded by a mandorla—that is, golden rays depicting sunshine. An angelic male figure at the bottom holds up a cloud with outstretched arms, behind which the Virgin Mary stands on a dark crescent moon. Her hands are folded in prayer, her head slightly inclined. Her outer robe is of a blue-green
tint, upon which gold stars appear, and it has a gold border. The image contains a combination of Biblical, Catholic, and indigenous symbols. First, it evokes the woman described in the Apocalypse (12:1): “And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” In the Guadalupe icon the stars appear on her cloak, but otherwise the visual reference is clear. This is important because major Mexican theologians, since the 17th century (especially of criollo background) have interpreted this visual reference as a fulfillment of the Biblical text and as a sign of the special election of Mexico as a new Promised Land on the part of God. Regarding the stars, there was in the past a crown on the Virgin of Guadalupe’s head, but it was removed. The icon also depicts traditional Catholic doctrines concerning Mary. Jeanette Favrot Peterson, points out some of these:

In the end, as Levi d’Ancona notes, the most popular of these traditional themes, St. John’s Apocalyptic woman and Mary surrounded by symbols of her purity, fused visually and symbolically with the Assumption of the Virgin to depict the Immaculate Conception. In all three types Mary is shown between heaven and earth, neither wholly earthbound nor remotely transcendental, as a bodily figure who mediates both spheres. It is a trio of overlapping Marian themes, the Mulier Amicta Sole [Woman clothed with the Sun], Assumption of the Virgin, and the Tota Pulchra [All Beautiful] that may have impacted the making of the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe. ¹

Both Marian doctrines mentioned by Peterson are depicted in the icon, and in her article she discusses and reproduces a number of paintings from the late 15th and the 16th centuries that contain several features of the Guadalupe icon. She maintains that the Indian painter, Marcos de Aquino, consciously chose these features as themes in the mid-16th century.

Indigenous symbolism is also prominent in the icon. A good summary of the interpretation of indigenous symbolism can be found on the website of the Basílica de Santa María de Guadalupe (http://www.virgendeguadalupe.org.mx/estudios/interpretacion.htm; accessed on May 27, 2008). The traditional interpretation points out several features in the image that refer to Aztec culture: e.g., the stars on Mary’s robe are said to match the constellations on the night of Dec. 12, 1531, when, the sources say, Mary appeared to Juan Diego; the Nahui Ollin, or Flower of Four Petals, an Aztec symbol of the divine presence, appears over the Virgin’s womb, indicating the presence of Jesus Christ; Mary stands in front of the sun and on top of the moon, both indicating her relation to Aztec religion which she supersedes but does not destroy. According to these interpretations of the icon, it serves as a pictograph that reveals to the indigenous peoples the icon’s meaning in a language they can understand.
The icon has existed since the 16th century, but the account of the apparition of the Virgin Mary to the Indian Juan Diego is separate from it. The famous story of the apparition first appears in two publications in the mid-17th century: Miguel Sánchez’ *Imagen de la Virgen María, Madre de Dios de Guadalupe, milagrosamente aparecida en la ciudad de México*, in 1648, and Luis Lasso de la Vega’s *Huei tlamahuiçoltica omonexiti in ilhuicac tlatoçacihuatpilli Santa Maria totlaçonanzin Guadalupe in nican huei altepenahuac Mexico itocayocan Tepeyaca*. The most important source is one section of Lasso de la Vega’s work, entitled *Nican mopohua*, which tells the story of the Virgin Mary’s appearance to an Indian man named Juan Diego. It is in this narrative where the strongest indigenous influence is present. The text is written in Nahuatl—either in well-written Nahuatl, with many “classical” features, according to Miguel León-Portilla, or in standard ecclesiastical Nahuatl, with a strong Spanish influence, according to Lisa Sousa, Stafford Poole and James Lockhart. León-Portilla is convinced that Antonio Valeriano, an Indian convert and scholar of the mid-16th century, was the true author or compiler of the *Nican mopohua*, relying heavily on oral tradition. Stafford Poole vigorously contests the idea of Valeriano’s authorship of the text. Poole states categorically that Luis Lasso de la Vega is the only possible author.

In the narrative, the Virgin Mary appears to Juan Diego four times in early December, 1531. The first time he hears the singing of exotic birds and sees a brilliant scene of desert plants and rocks all resplendent in different colors. Mary appears to him and addresses him in a friendly and familiar manner. She tells him who she is, and that she wants to console his people. She also tells him to go to the bishop, the Franciscan Juan de Zumárraga, and tell him that she wants a temple built in her honor. Juan Diego addresses her in a familiar and humble manner. He does what he is told, but the bishop is not open to his message and Juan Diego is ill-treated by the bishop’s servants. The next time that he sees Mary, he tells her that the meeting did not go well. He suggests that she send someone of high rank to the bishop. But she still wants Juan Diego. He then goes again to the bishop, who receives him, but is still not convinced. After this encounter, Juan Diego’s uncle falls very ill. Juan Diego wants to avoid the Lady and go instead to find a priest for his uncle. Mary again appears to him, tells him not to worry about his uncle since she healed him, and asks him to pick various flowers that were made to miraculously bloom out of season and take them to the bishop as a sign. He does so, and after opening his *tilma*, or cloak, the flowers fall to the floor, blooming and full of sweet scents, and then her image appears on Juan Diego’s cloak. Everyone is astounded, the bishop keeps Juan Diego’s *tilma*, builds Mary a church and deposits the *tilma* there as a relic and an object of devotion. A detailed description of the image is also given at the end of the *Nican mopohua*. 
A few indigenous elements of the story are very significant and have had a strong influence. The most important is Mary’s initial address to Juan Diego:

Know, rest assured, my youngest child, that I am the eternally consummate virgin Saint Mary, mother of the very true deity, God, the giver of life, the creator of people, the ever present, the lord of heaven and earth. I greatly wish and desire that they build my temple for me here, where I will manifest, make known, and give to people all my love, compassion, aid, and protection. For I am the compassionate mother of all you people here in this land, and of the other various peoples who love me, who cry out to me, who seek me, who trust in me. There I will listen to their weeping and their sorrows in order to remedy and heal all their various afflictions, miseries, and torments.²

What is significant here is the Nahua vocabulary used. The words used for God are very meaningful in Aztec religion. Miguel León-Portilla sheds light on some of the Aztec religious expressions:

Tonantzin, Nuestra madre, Totahztzin, Nuestro padre, eran conceptos clave en el pensamiento nahua que así concebía a ‘Aquel por quien se vive’, supremo Dador de la vida, Ipalnemohuani. La noble doncella que habla a Juan Diego le da a entender su relación personal con él. En seguida pronunciará sus varios nombres o títulos, todos ellos tomados de la tradición religiosa prehispánica. Es inantzin, madrecita de Ipalnemohuani, el Dador de la vida, invocado así en muchos cantares y antiguas plegarias…La noble señora enumeró así algunos de los principales atributos del Dios que adoraban los nahuas y también los cristianos: él da la vida, está en todas partes y es creador de los humanos.³

In this narrative, the Virgin Mary uses words and names that resonate in the religious world in which Juan Diego was raised. A positive link is established with the native culture and system of beliefs, and they are thereby affirmed and validated within the context of the times. What they were taught in their own culture has value.

Another major element of native culture given prominence in the *Nican mopohua* is the theme of *flor y canto* (flower and song). As mentioned already, when Juan Diego first meets the heavenly woman, it is in connection with an atmosphere of exotic singing birds and very colorful plants and rocks; and the sign of proof of his mission is a batch of sweetly smelling brilliant flowers blooming during winter. Miguel Leon-Portilla explains the significance of these elements:

Cantos al principio del relato y también del antiguo cantar [i.e. *Cuicapeuhcayotl*]; flores al final de uno y otro, son búsqueda o subconsciente
evocación de esa forma náhuatl de concebir lo que existe como “flor y canto,” in *xochitl, in cuicatl*, palabras que, al unirse, connotan los conceptos de poesía y realidad preciosa. También, como lo dejó dicho el sabio Tecayehuatzin de Huexotzinco, cantos y flores son: “tal vez lo verdadero en la tierra,” *açotle nelli in tlalticpac*. Es así el Nican Mopohua expresión de flor y canto, símbolos que, como el poema de inspiración prehispánica, entremezclan “la antigua sabiduría,” in *huehueh tlamatiliztli*, con el mensaje evangélico que los frailes daban a conocer a los indios.4

“Flor y canto” evoke paradise, the divine realm, supreme happiness, the meaning of life and “the old wisdom” of their ancestors. It is not accidental or incidental that Mary’s presence is connected with these elements, so full of meaning and close associations for the Aztec people. It is a sign of reaching out to them and of validation of their culture, including religion.

The icon and the *Nican mopohua*, though distinct, historically have been linked together. Without the narrative, the icon would be only one more depiction of the Virgin Mary and it probably would not have had such a great impact. The story without the icon would be just one more story of a Marian apparition. It is the combination of the two that has made the devotion of Our Lady of Guadalupe so powerful: Mary appearing as a mestiza maiden and speaking to a Nahua man in his own language.

**The Controversy over the Origin of the Icon and the Devotion**

The history of Our Lady of Guadalupe is both complex and controversial. Questions regarding its origin and historicity have been a longstanding battleground between traditional adherents (“apparitionists,” “*aparicionistas*” in Spanish) and those who have fought against it for various reasons—religious, historical and scientific (anti-apparitionists, “*antiaparicionistas*”). The first controversy occurred in 1556 when the Archbishop of Mexico City, Alonso de Montúfar, preached a sermon on September 6th praising and promoting devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe. He was a fervent promoter of popular devotion, including miracles, and he clearly believed that this devotion would attract the indigenous population. The Franciscan provincial, Fr. Francisco de Bustamante, responded on September 8th (the feast of the Nativity of Mary) by angrily denouncing the Archbishop. He was very worried that the Indian converts would get confused and lapse into idolatry. The Franciscans had carefully taught the indigenous converts that they should not adore images and that they needed to adhere to a spiritual worship of God that avoided idolatry. They also did not want the Indians to depend on miracles. They intensely disliked anything that was connected to the Guadalupan devotion, and believed that the confusion created in the Indians’ minds would undo all their work. It is not clear that the image on the cloak that is known as “Our Lady of Guadalupe” was the center of the devotion at the ermita, or chapel, of Guadalupe at this
time. Fr. Bustamante also stated that an Indian named “Marcos” created the painting very recently.  

This Franciscan opposition to the devotion of the Virgin of Guadalupe was strongly expressed again by the missionary and scholar of Nahuatl culture, Bernardo de Sahagún, in 1570. He wrote that the Indians at the church of Our Lady of Guadalupe were confusing the Virgin Mary, the “Mother of God,” with a native goddess named Tonantzin, which means “our mother.” The Franciscans were very worried that the Indians were worshiping “Tonantzin” under the cover of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Louise Burkhart, however, disputes this interpretation. She explains:

In colonial records, indigenous myths are often adapted in response to Christian teachings: colonial Indians were adept at reinventing their preconquest culture in order to suit their colonial situation... There is no evidence that Tepeyacac held any special meaning for sixteenth-century Indians. Thus, the link between Our Lady of Guadalupe and any pre-Columbian goddess is, at best, tenuous. Tonantzin is Mary; Mary is Tonantzin. That Indians used this title for Mary indicates that they viewed her as a maternal figure personally connected to them. To understand what a figure like Our Lady of Guadalupe could mean to them, connections must be sought not to ancient goddesses but to the religious life of Christianized Nahua Indians in the Mexico City area during the second half of the sixteenth century. A rich Marian spirituality characterizes their devotional expressions, with Mary embodying traditional attitudes toward the sacred as well as new concerns derived from Christianity and colonial life.

She maintains that Fr. Sahagún misinterpreted their use of the word “Tonantzin” when he believed that the Indians adored an Aztec goddess. The cultus at the shrine was the issue that caused him concern.

The other major controversies involve modern criticism. Some of the major anti-apparitionists are the following: Juan Bautista Muñoz (1794), Joaquín García Icazbalceta (a devout Catholic layman in the 19th century), Francisco de la Maza, Mauro Rodríguez, Edmund O’Gorman, and Stafford Poole (a 20th-century Catholic priest). The main point that these historians make is that until the publication of Miguel Sánchez’s *Imagen de la Virgen María...*, in 1648, and of Luis Lasso de la Vega’s *Huei tlamahuīçoltica...*, in 1649, there is virtual silence regarding the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Juan Diego. The now-famous image dates from the 16th century, but the famous story of the apparitions first “appeared” in these publications, and the historical critics have made this fact the foundation of their attacks on the traditional account of the apparitions and, by extension, on the devotion itself. The critics acknowledge the existence of the devotion, the cultus, the shrine, the pilgrimages, etc., but they maintain that these existed on their own without
Our Lady of Guadalupe summarizes the critical stance regarding the apparitions thus:

The years 1648 and 1649 are the crucial ones in the history of the Guadalupe apparitions. Miguel Sánchez made known to the criollos of New Spain a story that until that time was unknown or forgotten. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, he gave them a story that he and they appropriated as divine witness to the legitimacy of criollismo. In the years that followed the predominantly criollo secular clergy would embrace the story wholeheartedly and spread it among the criollos. With Sánchez began the long process whereby Guadalupe was fused with Mexican identity. Laso de la Vega, in contrast, sought to bring the message of compassion and consolation to the Indians. If he had any success, it was limited, because it was not until the eighteenth century that the Indians began to seek refuge under the shadow of the Virgin of Tepeyac.

Influence on the History and Culture of Mexico

Our Lady of Guadalupe’s greatest impact has been on the history, people, and culture of Mexico. Probably no other person, movement, ideology, political party or entity has been more influential in Mexico’s history and culture. This has certainly been the case since Miguel Sánchez and Luis Lasso de la Vega published their books in 1648 and 1649, respectively. Before that time, the cultus of Our Lady of Guadalupe at Tepeyac, just outside Mexico City, was gradually growing and gaining influence, but that influence was mainly local. Historical sources reveal that there was a significant level of devotion at the shrine at Tepeyac, among both the Spanish and the native populations. It is difficult to tell how widespread the devotion was among the Indian population. Certainly there were Indian converts who visited the shrine, since Bernardo de Sahagún complained about it. Also, apologists for Our Lady of Guadalupe point to oral tradition as the main source of natives’ knowledge of the apparitions, since very little was recorded in writing.

The criollos in the mid-17th century were the main impetus for the growth of the devotion (Stafford Poole would say they were the sole impetus for it). Both Sánchez and Lasso de la Vega were criollos. As a group, they were looked down upon by Spaniards from the peninsula, since they were born in Mexico. The Spaniards, for one thing, had the original Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura after which the Mexican Virgin was named. The Spaniards, whom the criollos called gachupines as a label of contempt, also had another devotion to the Virgin Mary, along with an image, which they called the
“Virgen de Remedios.” This was an artificial rivalry that reached well into the 19th century. The Virgin of Guadalupe provided the criollos with a heavenly patron, “born,” so to speak, in Mexico. She was the Mexican Virgin Mary. She provided them with an identity of heavenly origin to which they could point and boast. They began to think of themselves as *mexicanos*, and to think of their land as “México” instead of just “Nueva España.”

Beginning with the War of Independence in 1810, the Virgin of Guadalupe began to be invoked as a potent symbol of Mexican identity. Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a Catholic priest, led the war and had his followers invoke Our Lady of Guadalupe, employing her as both a visual symbol and a slogan. Our Lady of Guadalupe became the “criolla” Virgin and the Virgin of Los Remedios became the “gachupina,” the Virgin of the Spaniards. Even though political rivals set these two devotions to the Virgin against each other, they were closely associated in the past, and Solange Alberro even goes so far as to state that they originally were the same. More indigenous people became involved in the War, and Our Lady of Guadalupe began to be used as a symbol of resistance, even a justification for rebellion. William B. Taylor recalls a powerful example of how the icon was used in this war:

In December 1810, Father Hidalgo ordered the Indians of Juchipila…not to sack the estates of the local Spanish tax administrator. The Indians refused to obey, even after a direct order from their parish priest. They did it, they said, with the permission of the Virgin of Guadalupe. What had been forbidden only months before could now be accomplished under the higher authority of their protectress.⁸

Taylor remarks on the type of people who were attracted to the Virgin of Guadalupe as a political symbol during the War:

The image of Guadalupe had a special appeal in places where people thought of themselves as Mexicans, or as members of a social category without privileges, or as members of a group whose privileges had been lost—notably creoles, the lower clergy, and landless farmworkers, including Indians who thought of themselves as Indians.⁹

After the War, the Virgin of Guadalupe continued to be politicized. As the Mexican State became more secularized and hostile to the Church, she became an inspiration to Catholics in their struggle to maintain a public role for the Church in Mexico. That situation continues to this day. She has continued to be an inspiration in armed struggles. In the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, the followers of Emiliano Zapata carried banners with the Virgin of Guadalupe. During the Cristero War (1926-1929), the rallying cry of the rebels was “¡Viva Cristo Rey! ¡Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe!” The Virgin of Guadalupe has a place even within the recent Zapatista movement. In an online
article, Margarita Zires describes how the Zapatistas included the Virgin of Guadalupe in their cause. Subcomandante Marcos, in the mid-1990s, placed an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the midst of Zapatista assemblies and discussed issues and made decisions with her presence as a point of reference. Her image functioned as a sort of *escriba-oyente comunitario*, and was carried along. Zires describes the Virgin’s role as follows:

A través de la narración del proceso de deliberación, la Virgen se convierte en el símbolo de la solidaridad incondicional. Los pobladores de Guadalupe Tepeyac se convierten en el pueblo elegido, adonde la Virgen decide ir, subir y bajar montañas, cruzar selvas hasta encontrarlos…La gente la tiende a identificar con la comandante Ramona, una de las pocas mujeres guerrilleras de esa región que en la lucha zapatista ha sobresalido. La Virgen adquiere una identidad indígena y revolucionaria a la vez. Los rayos que la rodean muestran el carácter bendito y sobrenatural de esa imagen y, por lo tanto, de la lucha zapatista en la cual la Virgen se ve inserta en esa representación visual.10

Another example of the presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican public life is the following:

An enormous student strike was in progress at this time [1999] at the national university, and in this supposedly secular nation, a newsletter [Machetearte 50 (Dec. 7, 1999)] distributed by some of the strikers called on the Virgin of Guadalupe, ‘Patrona de la Insurgencia’ (Patroness of the Insurgency) to help them prevail. A huge picture of Guadalupe graced the fiftieth issue of this publication, and a double-page drawing in the center showed Guadalupe under an eagle (a strong national symbol drawn from the ancient symbol for Tenochtitlan), a pyramid, a church, a middle-class apartment house, a truck, an earth mover, an Aztec warrior, and a feathered serpent. The drawing evoked an enormous number of symbolic associations—the working and middle classes, the Aztec past, the Catholic heritage of the country, all centered on the Virgin Mother.11

This example shows how the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe reaches beyond the sanctuary and the Catholic home and into the everyday affairs, even the public disputes, of general society.

The influence of Our Lady of Guadalupe reaches far beyond politics and national identity. One aspect of the Virgin of Guadalupe that has been emphasized by many writers is *mestizaje*. The Virgin of Guadalupe is often called *la morena*, and this feature of the icon has captured the hearts and imaginations of many people. This is an instance where the icon and the *Nican Mopohua* work together, so to speak. The dark complexion of the original icon is very pronounced. The image on Juan Diego’s tilma and the *Nican Mopohua* both emphasize Mary’s dark face. She appears not as a Spaniard, nor completely as a native, but rather as a combination of the two.
In racially divided societies, such as Mexico and the United States, the mestizo features of the Virgin’s appearance on the tilma/icon have served to spur pride in one’s racial identity, as comfort in the struggles for just and equal treatment and respect, and as compassion in their suffering. Robert Goizueta, in an essay regarding Mexican identity, brings together various aspects of the Virgin’s influence on these racial issues:

To Western Christians accustomed to images of a blonde and blue-eyed Mary, this Lady must surely appear incongruous; her olive skin tells the indigenous people of Mexico that she, La Morenita, is one of them. It tells all Mexicans and, indeed, all Latinos that she is one of them...If Juan Diego is to be evangelized, it will be through a dark-skinned Lady on Tepeyac, the sacred place of the Nahua, not through a Spanish bishop in his palace. Indeed, through Guadalupe, the very relationship between evangelizer and evangelized is reversed: the indigenous man, Juan Diego, is sent to evangelize the bishop.\textsuperscript{12}

In general society, and to some extent even in the Church, “peoples of color” (to use the phrase sometimes in circulation) have been oppressed and been dealt second-class status. The radical nature of the Virgin of Guadalupe is that in this icon she is represented as a member of the lowest classes of society.

One such downtrodden group is the Indians themselves. Reference has already been made to how they played a role in the Mexican War of Independence, and how some of them appealed to the Virgin of Guadalupe in order to justify violent action. Nevertheless, it is somewhat difficult to find out what they themselves thought, in their own words, about the Virgin of Guadalupe. Almost all the available information concerns either mestizos and/or criollos, or was (and still is) written by them. If Antonio Valeriano were the original author of the \textit{Nican Mopohua}, and if he drew upon indigenous legends, songs and other traditions in order to compose this foundational document, then it is a most valuable witness to indigenous thought. If, however, the document is only a criollo creation, as Stafford Poole maintains, then it serves only as a symbol and would not be an accurate reflection of indigenous belief. Linda Hall states,

What seems evident to me is that following the Conquest, Marian devotion became widespread in central Mexico among the indigenous peoples and was conflated with the symbols and spaces of pre-Spanish religious belief. By the seventeenth century, her position as protector, miracle-worker, and active advocate for the Nahuas and other indigenous peoples in the region was well established. Not just the Virgin of Guadalupe, but swarms of advocations and images of Mary were present and revered. Though by no means identical to or simply substituted for indigenous goddesses, she was often associated with indigenous sacred spaces. These connections, although they made the representatives of the Church nervous, were
nevertheless key in establishing Christian worship in forms that were intelligible to the native peoples and served their needs.\textsuperscript{13}

The Virgin Mary, then, seems to have resonated with many Indians, since on religious, psychological and social levels she met many of their needs, or at least appealed to them. They had been decimated on many levels, and they needed to believe in someone or something that would help them cope with their new devastating reality. Richard Nebel gives an idea of where the Virgin of Guadalupe fits into the Nahua system of beliefs after the Conquest:

\textit{…la aparición de la Virgen a un representante de la raza indígena, Juan Diego, significaba un retorno a la Tonantzin, otorgándoles no solo la continuidad de su raza, sino sobre todo la continuidad de su fe en sus dioses propios. Por otro lado, la tradición de la aparición sirvió también como un testimonio simbólico para establecer que los indígenas eran tan capaces y dignos como los españoles de recibir la enseñanza de la fe Cristiana y de ser redimidos.}\textsuperscript{14}

In the 20th century, Indians participated in the Mexican Revolution and took part in social protest movements. As seen in the case of the Zapatistas, the Virgin of Guadalupe remains a strong symbol of inspiration for indigenous peoples. An incident from the early 1970s also reveals her influence. The Chinanteco Indians were protesting the building of the Cerro de Oro dam, which would have involved their displacement. A mysterious figure who called himself “Ingeniero el Gran Dios” claimed to speak for the Virgin of Guadalupe. He invoked the figures of Benito Juárez and Lázaro Cárdenas, and threatened serious consequences if the dam were built.\textsuperscript{15}

The enigmatic figure of “Ingeniero el Gran Dios” gives a fleeting glimpse of this lasting influence, and his voice is a rare instance of Indians expressing, in their own words, their devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Although there has been some syncretistic confusion in the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Christian spirit of the devotion as expressed by Indians has been genuine. George L. Scheper looks negatively upon a tendency to misinterpret, or downplay, the Christian substance of Indian devotion. He states,

the appropriation of Guadalupe that currently seems to have the most drawing power among intellectuals outside the strictly Catholic community is what might be called the indigenista interpretation: the interpretation that steps down from the universalizing reading of Guadalupe as Female Archetype and sees her instead as a specific mask or even disguise for a variety of Aztec fertility goddesses lumped together collectively as “Tonantzin,” Our Little Mother…This is the old “idols behind altars” thesis most famously purveyed in the book of that title by Anita Brenner (1929), and now overwhelmingly pervasive in the neo-Aztec movement in Mexico and de rigueur generally in intellectual circles ever since the
Columbian Quincentennial became the occasion for privileging indigenous perspectives in revisionist readings of the New World encounters.16

Another way in which the devotion plays a positive role for native peoples is in providing a space where their culture can be expressed in an open and public manner. Konrad Tyrakowski describes how it is manifested in public pilgrimages to the Basilica of Guadalupe:

Grupos de la llamada “música azteca” tocan instrumentos indígenas antiguos como el huéhuetl o el teponaxtli, sacuden sonajas, acompañan con chirimías y tambores, y hacen sonar enormes caracoles. A veces se representa la ‘Danza del Tigre’. Sin duda alguna estas actuaciones tienen un origen prehispánico.17

Chicanos provide another excellent example of how the Virgin of Guadalupe’s influence has expanded. These are Mexican-Americans who strongly identify with their Mexican and mestizo identities. In many ways, they have invigorated the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, giving it new life and varied expression. This icon and its particular devotion to the Virgin Mary reinforce their Catholic identity and Mexican identity, both needed in the exceedingly diverse and sometimes hostile social environment that is the United States. Our Lady of Guadalupe provides a sense of stability and identity and serves as a symbol of hope and compassion. The themes of liberation from oppression, spiritual motherhood and ethnic identity often are connected with the Virgin of Guadalupe in Chicano writings and culture. Andrés G. Guerrero eloquently expresses what Our Lady of Guadalupe means for many Chicanos:

Almost all Chicano Catholic homes in the barrios of the Southwest display Guadalupe’s picture. Pachucos sometimes tattoo her entire image on their backs. In the context of the Chicano experience of oppression Guadalupe is a strong symbolic spiritual mother who is always there to lend a helping hand to the poor...Hence, the concept of Guadalupe as a liberator and a mother of the oppressed is very real to us.18

On a different level—the domestic and the personal—the Virgin of Guadalupe has been described as mother: mother of Jesus Christ, mother of Indians, but also as a personal maternal figure. A Mexican woman who was recently asked (April 2008) what the Virgin of Guadalupe means to Mexicans said, “Ella es mamá.” This woman made the point that the Virgin Mary (specifically as Guadalupe) is accessible. God the Father is considered as too remote. Jesus Christ is the stern judge and thus is difficult to approach. And many Mexicans approach the Virgin of Guadalupe as a personal mediatrix. This is a cultural and social reality not in accord with Catholic doctrine, since the New Testament reveals both God the Father and Jesus Christ as merciful
and approachable. But the social reality is that often in Mexican familial life, the father is a stern and fearsome figure. This is vividly described by John Bushnell, who wrote about the maternal role that the Virgin of Guadalupe played in the social life of the Ocuitéca Indian village of San Juan Atzingo:

The Virgin of Guadalupe is a comforting, permissive figure who evokes a rather unique response among the villagers. I observed San Juan men, quite deep in their cups, make their way to the family altar, lift up the picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe, kiss and embrace the representation with an unashamed display of affection, and proclaim with tear-filled eyes, “Mamacita Linda!” Holding pottery cup or gourd bowl of pulque on high, they would exclaim with obviously deep feeling, “Pulque—the milk of the Virgin!” On occasions such as this, when San Juan men drop their normal reserve under the influence of alcohol, the differentiated role of the Virgin comes into focus. The eulogistic phrases and the emotionality suffusing such behavior indicate that this saint occupies the status of a mother-figure.19

The Virgin of Guadalupe also serves as a maternal figure on a larger scale. Octavio Paz, the Mexican novelist, comments on her maternal role:

The Indian goddesses were goddesses of fecundity, linked to the cosmic rhythms, the vegetative processes and agrarian rites. The Catholic Virgin is also the Mother (some Indian pilgrims still call her Guadalupe-Tonantzin), but her principal attribute is not to watch over the fertility of the earth but to provide refuge for the unfortunate. The situation has changed: the worshipers do not try to make sure of their harvests but to find a mother’s lap. The Virgin is the consolation of the poor, the shield of the weak, the help of the oppressed. In sum, she is the Mother of orphans.10

In San Antonio, Texas, the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe is called upon as an impetus to unite diverse peoples. In San Antonio, the Hispanic community is well settled. It was originally part of New Spain, and the Mexican population predates the English-speaking Anglo population. Nevertheless, ethnic tension persists and the Virgin of Guadalupe is enlisted, so to speak, as a bridge-builder. Timothy Matovina describes how this is put into action by one parish:

Despite the limitations, inconsistencies, divergent views, and ambiguity that to some degree thwart Guadalupe’s transformative influence, San Fernando leaders continue their plea for Guadalupe devotees to be ambassadors of the celestial mestiza and to promote their parish’s penchant for dramatic public rituals. They also urge Guadalupe’s faithful to provide a witness of faith, unity, and what Alejandro García-Rivera has called “subversive hospitality,” a reversal of roles in which Mexican Americans are the Juan Diegos who welcome Anglo Americans and other San Antonians.
to their parish and its traditions and provide a model for a new future of respectful pluralism.\textsuperscript{21}

However, not every manifestation of the Virgin of Guadalupe’s image is positive, or is interpreted in a positive way. Her image appears in many places in the American Southwest, some of them not very flattering: liquor stores, houses of prostitution, tattoos and clothing. The image has been appropriated even by Hispanic urban gangs as a badge of ethnic identity. This last situation occurred as a problem in 1998 in a Santa Fe, New Mexico, elementary school where some students were wearing the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe on their shirts. The principal considered the shirts to be “gang attire” and banned them from the school. This decision outraged the Catholic community and the Archbishop, who interpreted the decision as a denial of religious expression. The principal explained that the decision was made to protect the children of the school from the influence of gangs. The clash of interpretations was inevitable. In various venues, especially the media, members of the community debated the meaning of the Virgin of Guadalupe.\textsuperscript{22}

**Influence on the Catholic Church**

The influence of the icon and devotion of Our Lady of Guadalupe has been very strong in the Catholic Church, especially in Mexico. The influence of the devotion has been both positive and negative. This section will first deal with the status of the devotion, and afterwards with its influence and meaning.

How has the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe fit into the missionary strategy, or doctrine, of the Catholic Church in Mexico and beyond? The first Franciscan missionaries, in the context of the Erasmian reform movement of the early 16th century, approached the “Indians” with a purist attitude and mentality, attempting to be faithful to the Bible and the doctrine of the Church in a way that could not accommodate indigenous practices and beliefs, especially human sacrifice. Another “strategy,” or mentality, has its origin in the Apostle Paul’s speech in the Areopagus in Athens (documented in the Acts of the Apostles), in which he appealed to their altar dedicated to the “unknown god,” and thus to their ancestral practice, and this became a longstanding Christian approach to relating to the beliefs and practices of “pagan” peoples. Justin Martyr also expressed this in the 2nd century when he spoke of “logoi spermatikoi,” or “seeds of truth,” among the gentiles. Also, Pope Gregory I, advising Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, in England, told him to accept and integrate native practices even into the Liturgy to the extent that they did not contradict Christian doctrine. This advice was widely adopted in Europe through the centuries, resulting in many syncretistic practices regarding the “cultus” toward saints, the Virgin Mary, and sacred places. The icon and devotion of the Virgin of Guadalupe, along with the narration of the *Nican mopohua*, belong to this alternate missionary strategy, which consists...
of an attitude of acceptance of whatever good can be found in other cultures. This involves an attitude of loving respect and a willingness to listen to what the evangelized people have to say and offer. Clodomiro Siller neatly sums up this approach:

El evento de Guadalupe, narrado en el Nican mopohua, visto en su estructura y simbolismo nahuas, restituye al indio su dignidad, recupera como cristiano el núcleo religioso indio, pone la evangelización como la acción liberadora de la Virgen con la colaboración del pobre, critica el esquema y metodología misionera de los religiosos españoles, y sitúa el lugar del culto y de la fe fuera de la dominación.\(^{23}\)

In the last two centuries, and especially recently in the Church since the Second Vatican Council, much of the emphasis in missionary work, liturgy, theology and catechesis has been placed on inculturation, and the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe has played a strong role in orienting the Church in this direction. In this devotion, the emphasis is clearly placed on the native peoples of Mexico, and on the Spanish only through the mediation of the Indian Juan Diego, as the special recipients of God’s care. In this case, the issues of both ethnic origin and social class are addressed, and the usual order is reversed. More than anything else, attitudes within the Church have been changed regarding ethnic and social relations and questions regarding social privileges. Certainly, the views of ecclesiastical leaders towards indigenous peoples have changed. Another benefit to Mexico and the Church is that the Guadalupe devotion has put Mexico on the Catholic map, so to speak, and it has enriched the Church’s universality. This aspect has been brought out by Elio Masferrer Kan:

Lo más importante del culto guadalupano es que representa un proceso social y colectivo mediante el cual la población mestiza construye una nueva versión del catolicismo, el catolicismo mexicano. Esto confiere al guadalupanismo un papel privilegiado en la construcción de la identidad nacional Mexicana. Pero aquí no termina la cuestión sino que de alguna manera marca el inicio del proceso. El culto a la Virgen de Guadalupe representa también la inserción de los mexicanos en un contexto universal y plural, donde se articulan manteniendo su propia identidad.\(^{24}\)

Many theologians have addressed the issue of inculturation. One theologian on the popular level who has been a major proponent of the devotion and message of the Virgin of Guadalupe is Fr. Virgilio Elizondo, a priest from San Antonio, Texas, founder of the Mexican American Cultural Center, and now [2008] a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame. He has written extensively on the Virgin of Guadalupe and mestizaje in a glowing and idealistic manner and, as a result, has drawn the attention of
Stafford Poole, who considers his treatment of history to be unrealistic and inaccurate. Nevertheless, Elizondo’s interpretation of the *Nican Mopohua* has been influential and needs to be treated here. It is an expression of liberation theology and an example of how the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe has exercised influence on the Church and society. Fr. Elizondo sees Juan Diego as a representative of a thoroughly oppressed people, the Nahuas. His culture and religion have been stolen from him. His people are demoralized, and the Virgin Mary appears and the tables are turned. Fr. Elizondo states,

She appears as the Indian Mother of God and the abandoned mestizo child of the Indian people. Through her, God vindicates the downtrodden. In her, the Indians and their ancestors are vindicated. Through her, a new means of evangelization—purified of ethnocentric limitations—is suggested…In her we move from the radical opposition of the two religions to a new synthesis that will occur in the new life that she is about to give birth to—the new Christianity of the new humanity of the Americas. She will be the compassionate and listening mother of all who come to her.  

The devotion is fervently expressed as popular religion, especially in Mexico and the United States, but also in other Latin American countries, and even in Europe. The impact of the devotion is universal. Fr. Virgilio Elizondo advocates for the value of popular religion, since it is the spontaneous expression of the common people. In this way, the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe keeps alive a traditional manner of expressing faith for many people, and in the post-Vatican II era, with its de-emphasis of traditional devotions and Marian piety, that impact is very significant. As Jeanette Rodriguez states,

To appreciate the significance of Our Lady of Guadalupe, it is crucial to understand the context in which she is recognized: popular religion…When I speak of Catholicism in relationship to the Mexican American culture, I am not referring to the institutionalized version of Catholicism, but to popular Catholicism, handed down through generations by the laity more than by the ordained clergy.

**Conclusion**

The devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe is one way in which the culture of the Aztecs has had a major impact on the world. It employs Aztec imagery and transmits a wholehearted sense of respect for the native peoples and their culture. It has functioned as a symbol and source of consolation and meaning for millions of people, especially in Mexico and the United States, but also for many people around the world. María Cristina Camacho de la Torre, in her book *Fiesta de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, tells how the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe has found a home in various countries of Europe, Asia and Africa, including the Middle East. It was initially spread by missionaries, but
Our Lady of Guadalupe has been adapted to various cultures over the years. It has also served as the catalyst for a great change of attitude towards the native peoples and cultures of Mexico, and that is one of its lasting legacies.

NOTES


4. Ibid., p. 55-56.

5. See also Jeanette Favrot Peterson, “Creating the Virgin of Guadalupe: The Cloth, the Artist, and Sources in Sixteenth-Century New Spain”: 585.


9. Ibid., 296.


17. Konrad Tyranowski, “La Villa de Guadalupe: centro religioso y nacional: elementos del desarrollo geográfico del mayor santuario de México,” in Giuriati, Paolo, and Elio Masferrer Kan, coordinadores. *No temas...yo soy tu madre: un estudio socioantropológico de los peregrinos a la*
27. For an extended treatment, see Camacho de la Torre, María Cristina, *Fiesta de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, 149-157.

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