

Fall 2020

Our Lady of Guadalupe and Missiology

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Recommended Citation

McQuillan, C. T. (2020). Our Lady of Guadalupe and Missiology. *Spiritan Horizons*, 16 (16). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol16/iss16/9>

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OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE AND MISSIOLOGY

Spiritan missionaries can learn a great deal of missiology from Our Lady of Guadalupe. Since so few Spiritans work with the Spanish-speaking peoples, many assume that the appearance of Our Lady in Mexico City is just one more that appeals to popular Marian devotion. However, a closer examination of the history and reality behind this devotion can lead us not only to a deeper appreciation of Mary's love of the Church, but also to an awareness of her involvement in its very mission. Many consider Mexico to be a very Catholic country, but many may not be aware that the first missionaries that came from Spain were a dismal failure in their attempts to evangelize Native Americans. It was only through the intervention of the Virgin Mary that any success was achieved and that success is because Our Lady of Guadalupe had come to show the foreign missionaries how to communicate with her American born children.

A VERY SHORT SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF OUR LADY OF TEPEYAC

The Aztecs, an indigenous people, built an Empire consisting of three independently governed city states in Central Mexico, from 1428 until conquered by Spanish conquistadors led by Cortez in 1519. Like the Roman Empire they allowed the rulers of conquered peoples to govern themselves in exchange for annual tribute and men for their armies. They practiced polytheism and allowed conquered peoples to worship their own gods. The sun was considered a god and the moon its goddess, but they were anticipating their end as well as that of the world. Human sacrifice was practiced in an attempt to prolong the life of the sun. They developed a complex system of government and had a codified written law. Rulers represented particular gods and ruled by divine right which was inherited.

As stated above, the first missionaries that came to Mexico from Spain, after two years of evangelization among the Aztec people had baptized all too few. Those practicing the faith were some conquistadores (conquerors), their families, and their servants. There were also many mestizos or half-breed descendants of Spanish immigrants and their families. Among them was a pious young man named Juan Diego (today Saint Juan Diego) who while traversing the Tepeyac Hill in 1531, hearing a beautiful voice singing, approached in order to investigate its source. As he neared, he was startled by a vision of the Virgin Mary. She requested Juan Diego to carry a message to the Bishop of Mexico City and instruct him to

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have a church built at the base of that hill where there had been an Aztec temple. Juan Diego agreed to deliver the message, but underwent a long wait before he was allowed an interview with the bishop.

The bishop on hearing Juan Diego's story reacted as might any one of us—with suspicion. Why would the Virgin Mary use a man of such low standing? Suspecting Juan to be nothing more than a well-intentioned, but ignorant and perhaps deranged peasant, he dispatched him quickly with the admonition that the Virgin would need to send him a sign so that he could be sure that it was truly the Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ, making such an apparently absurd request.

Juan Diego returned to Tepeyac and informed Our Lady of the Bishop's negative response. The Virgin then instructed Juan Diego to gather some flowers from a nearby rose bush and to carry them to the Bishop in his *tilma* (Native organic cloak made from a local plant). Juan did as he was instructed, surprised to find a rose bush in bloom in a place where rose bushes are not known to grow, and took them to the bishop.

Once again Juan Diego had to endure a long wait until finally he was ushered into the Bishop's study to present the gift he was carrying. When he lowered his *tilma*, the roses fell to the floor, revealing the image of Our Lady of Tepeyac. Needless to say, the image surprised everyone present and was eventually put on display in the Basilica built under the orders of the Franciscan Bishop. It soon became necessary to build another church nearby in order to baptize those who beheld the image of Our Lady, renamed Guadalupe by the bishop, after a popular Spanish Marian devotion.

Today that image is still on display in the third temple built in the plaza at the base of the Tepeyac hill. Literally thousands come on a daily basis to behold and venerate the image which is on display behind protective glass, (after a bomb attack by some fanatics).

THE ONGOING MIRACULOUS SIGNS OF TEPEYAC

When one realizes that there is nothing in Juan Diego's *tilma* that could explain the image it bears, one can only stand in awe. There is neither paint nor tints in the fibers which normally last a maximum of thirty years, but have endured over five hundred! Actually, there is no image in the *tilma*, rather the image floats in front of the cloth and it is possible to pass a laser light beam between the two. Studies on the temperature of the *tilma* have shown that it remains at a constant 98.6° F, regardless of the temperature in the Basilica.

The eyes are so life-like that they reflect the image of

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the bishop's office at the moment that Juan Diego opened his *tilma*. Clearly visible is the candelabra over the bishop's desk, the surprised bishop's face and others as well as the strap of a sandal on a kneeling figure's foot. Also recently, an ophthalmologist discovered capillaries while examining the eyes under a microscope. Furthermore, the irises in the eyes dilate according to the intensity of the light in the basilica. Thus, we have an on-going miracle.

MISSIONARY CRITIQUE OF THE SPANISH FRANCISCAN MISSIONARIES

Vigilio P. Elizondo wrote a fascinating critical analysis of the failure of the Spanish missionaries versus the success of Our Lady of Guadalupe in his book entitled, *La Morenita*.¹ He points out that the Spanish missionaries had planned the catechesis of the Aztec people while still in Madrid! They had actually devised a refined theological plan of doctrines to be presented to the people of America with absolutely no knowledge of those they wished to evangelize. They knew almost nothing of their history, customs, language, philosophy and religious beliefs. Horrifying were the stories of human sacrifice, but they had no clue as to its role in the Aztec culture and assumed that the indigenous peoples of America simply lacked a culture of their own. There was no thought of becoming one with those they hoped to evangelize. On the contrary, they were more like cultural colonizers bent on liberating pagans from their savagery by incorporating them into their own European way of life. This is exemplified by the name change the Spanish bishop gave to Our Lady of Tepeyac.

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The reality of the Aztec nation however, was that they were a highly developed civilization. They were astrologists and their philosophy was quite advanced. They had developed a religion based on the belief that the sun is god and the moon his goddess. Unfortunately they also believed that they had to appease their god with human sacrifice. They believed in an afterlife, so human sacrifice wasn't seen so much as a punishment as a reward. Sports were important to the Aztec people who also rewarded their champion teams with death!

Aztec philosophy was so well refined that it led them not to trust the spoken word. They were aware that each person has his own particular perspective on reality and tends to undervalue some aspects of the truth while giving other elements an exaggerated significance. The Aztec philosophers were well aware that it is ever so easy to take things out of context and distort the meaning of things.

The missionaries, who came to Mexico, failed to take into account the philosophy and cosmology of the people that they wished to Evangelize and thus sabotaged their own efforts.

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The Virgin stands on the moon which serves as her throne. She is not crushing the moon god under her feet, but rather using the old religion as a springboard into the new

Before learning and building on Aztec beliefs and values, they began to preach at them. The movie, *The Black Robe*, a must see for any future missionary, depicts the haughty and arrogant attitude by which the missionary is quick to condemn before he has gained the trust of those he hopes to evangelize.

If the missionaries had only taken the time to understand that the Aztecs communicated truth via poems, songs and hieroglyphics, they would have been so much more effective in their evangelization. The Aztecs understood that one cannot take a line out of a poem or song nor remove one of the symbols engraved in a hieroglyphic. Each symbol or word or verse's meaning has to be interpreted within the context of all the other symbols, words and verses. It took the intervention of the Holy Mother of Jesus, who by her example taught the missionaries the importance of incarnating ourselves among those we wish to evangelize.

The Aztecs believed a prophecy that their gods were dying and at their death, the world would end. Therefore they didn't resist the arrival of the conquistadores who seemed to be confirming that prophecy. However, when they contemplated the "Morenita" (dark skinned native girl), they immediately noticed that the maiden was not blocking the rays of the sun, but that the rays are depicted as passing through her. The message was clear: the old god was not dying but rather renewed through her. The Virgin stands on the moon which serves as her throne. She is not crushing the moon god under her feet, but rather using the old religion as a springboard into the new, much like the Old Testament prepares us to understand the New Covenant.

The Aztecs did not necessarily see the miracles that we note about Juan Diego's *tilma* today, but they were able to read the image like the hieroglyphic that it is. They read the image as we read the written Gospel! I enjoy playing a small prank on Protestants that happen to come into my office by asking them if they believe that the Gospel should be translated into every language in the world. They always respond in the affirmative. Then, I point out the image of Guadalupe as I tell them that it is the Gospel written in Aztec. Typically, their faces go blank as they are unable to perceive anything other than another Catholic image.

The Aztecs, on the other hand, see one of their own, dressed as a virgin, but wearing the sash of a pregnant woman, two articles of clothing never worn together. They notice the cross worn around her neck and they especially notice the position of the stars which seem randomly placed to us, but in fact correspond to their position over Mexico City the day that Juan Diego opened his cloak. Their position however is not

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that of the stars beheld from earth, but rather from above the cosmos! The real beauty of the hieroglyphic is that it confirms the truth of the Gospel that the missionaries were trying to communicate to them.

Unfortunately, many artistic representations of Our Lady of Tepeyac present her with the white face of a European maiden. Elizondo entitled his book, “La Morenita,” with the intention of emphasizing that Mary identifies with her children, as all missionaries who desire success in their preaching, must aim to inculturate themselves and identify with those they are called to serve. It may not be fully possible, but the ideal remains true.

Today, the devotion of Our Lady of Guadalupe dominates Hispano American spirituality. Unfortunately, many of those who promote this devotion place too much emphasis on the care Mary has for each of her children, while neglecting to point out the missionary objective of her intervention. While Mary does undoubtedly care for each of her children, she is equally concerned for her son’s body—the Church. The Church has the primary mission of preaching the Good News everywhere, therefore this is one of the Virgin Mary’s priorities, so she intercedes by example in order to show the well-intentioned missionaries how to use the very culture of the people to bring them to accept the Gospel. Agents of evangelization need to learn from the example of our holy mother to concern themselves not only with the message but equally important, the means or media that they employ to communicate the Word. As Marshall McLuhan stated in the sixties, *The Medium is the Message*,² affirming that how we receive a message touches us just as profoundly, if not more so than the very message itself. Theologically, we can say that Jesus is the Word made flesh. His body is the means by which we receive the Gospel. His life and the way he treated people is as much a part of the message as his spoken words. A missionary who does not live the message he preaches is quickly recognized as a Pharisee. Our message is about the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all peoples based on a common Father. Therefore a missionary must become the brother of all those to whom he wishes to announce the Good News.

CONCLUSION

Missionaries therefore need to ensure that the methods employed to communicate the message harmonize and affirm the truth of the Gospel. We cannot lack respect for the dignity of every person as we preach God’s love for them. Our preaching, our lives, must also express that truth in the very way we communicate it.

There are often elements in a peoples’ culture which

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cannot be harmonized with the Gospel, but this should not blind the missionaries to the many more expressions of their values which are not only consistent with the Gospel, but in fact, facilitate its acceptance. A missionary must be open to the food, dress, music, customs, art, philosophy and seek out a peoples' cosmology before he dare begin the process of pre-evangelization. Love of a people must be expressed in authentic respect for their culture and identity. Pope John Paul II calls us to evangelize their culture, which in no way implies its destruction, but rather complementing it by the light of the Gospel.

There is an all too common belief that immigrants should divest themselves of their own culture and adapt themselves to their new homeland. However, this is not only impossible, but is also a lack of understanding of the deep relationship between one's own culture and one's personal identity. Clearly, there is great value in immigrants learning the language of the dominant culture but they should never be expected to leave completely behind the culture which gave them their identity. However, in the case of the missionary, there must be a determined effort to become one with those he serves.

The Virgin Mother of Guadalupe shows us the importance of the mystery of Incarnation. She allowed Jesus to live not only in her womb, but also her heart and mind. Likewise she, following her son's example, becomes one with the Aztec people and speaking to them via their language and customs, reveals to us the very basic principles of missiology.

Prior to preaching we must take the time to learn and to love the cosmology and the idiosyncrasies of those we wish to serve. We must reflect carefully on how we use the media to communicate the message of Incarnation and Redemption so that we facilitate rather than impede its acceptance. We must allow the Holy Spirit to effect within ourselves the Paschal Mystery through which we die to our own culture in order to be reborn in our host culture. We need to allow our new culture to evangelize ourselves as we attempt to communicate the Good News of resurrection. Incarnation is the prerequisite of Resurrection.

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ENDNOTES

1. Vigilio, Elizondo P., *La Morenita, Evangelizer of the Americas*. San Antonio, Tx.: Mexican American Cultural Center (MAC) 1981.
2. McLuhan, Marshall, *The Medium is the Message*. Bantam Books, 1967.