

Juan Diego: Our Lady's Special Messenger

by Paola Victoria Castillo, 5th Grade, November 2018†

The Blessed Virgin Mary has chosen many different people to appear to in the world, but in Mexico she chose a humble, peasant Aztec Indian named Juan Diego. Juan and his wife Maria Lucia converted from paganism to Catholicism after hearing Spanish Franciscan priests preach about the Good News of Jesus Christ. Before Catholic missionaries came to Mexico, Aztecs worshipped false gods, believing they demanded the sacrifice of their own children to appease them.

On December 9, 1531 when Juan Diego was walking to Mass, he heard heavenly singing from the top of Tepeyac Hill and discovered a most dazzling Aztec princess who was the Mother of God. She asked Juan to tell Bishop Zumarraga to build a shrine there in her honor. He obeyed her, but the bishop did not believe him at first. Juan returned to Tepeyac Hill and told Blessed Mother everything. "I am a lowly man, send someone else, someone important, to give your message to the bishop," Juan pleaded. However, the Lady responded that she had chosen *him* for the job. He promised to fulfill her wish the following day.

True to his word, Juan went to the bishop and explained everything again. Bishop Zumarraga requested a sign for him to believe that Juan was telling the truth. Juan faithfully reported this to Our Lady. She told Juan to come back a third time the next day. That night Juan's uncle, Bernardino, became very sick and begged Juan to bring him a priest to give him the last rites, for he too was a Catholic. As Juan ran to call a priest, he had to pass Tepeyac Hill, but he was afraid that the Lady would be there and he did not want any delays. Although he took a back road, he could not avoid Mary, however, for she met him there.

Juan explained his uncle's illness, and Mary listened kindly. She replied, "Listen, my son, to what I tell you now. Do not be troubled, or disturbed by anything. Do not be afraid of illness, suffering, or pain. Don't you know that I will protect you? Don't you remember that I am your Mother? Do you need anything else? Don't worry. Your uncle is already cured.... Go, my son, to the top of the hill.... There you will find many flowers; gather them and bring them to me." Relieved, he carried out her command.

Reaching the top of the hill, he was speechless. Roses in winter?! He picked them and brought them to Mary to arrange in his tilma as the sign for the bishop. Mary asked Juan to be her ambassador!

In spite of many obstacles, Juan finally met with the bishop and opened his tilma to let the roses drop to the floor. Everybody in the room knelt in adoration. When Juan looked down at his tilma, he beheld the image of Our Lady as she appeared to him. The bishop begged Juan's forgiveness for not believing initially. Afterward, Bishop Zumarraga had a chapel built on Tepeyac Hill dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the name Mary gave to Juan's uncle when she healed him. This title of Our Lady means "she who crushes the serpent."

Juan humbly accepted the bishop's offer to become the sacristan of the newly built shrine. For seventeen years until his death, he devotedly shared his testimony with visitors, both natives and tourists, and assisted them in growing in faith in Jesus and His loving Mother. As a result of Juan's witness, penances, and frequent Holy Communions, many conversions and miraculous healings took place. Thousands of Aztecs stopped worshipping the sun god and instead embraced Jesus Christ and were baptized as Christians. Their barbaric, pagan practices of infanticide came to an end, and they began to understand that life is precious in the womb, especially since the black sash that Our Lady wore around her waist signified that she was pregnant.

Juan Diego's life and work as custodian of the shrine still impact the Church today. Over fifteen million tourists make a pilgrimage to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe each year, making it one of the most visited Marian shrines in the world. Numerous miracles and conversions have occurred and even now continue to take place. Juan Diego's tilma is a miracle in itself. Scientists have studied the original tilma which is still in the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Tepayac Hill. They agree that the image of Our Lady is miraculous; it could not have been painted on the tilma because the fibers have not absorbed any colors! Naturally, tilmas are only supposed to last for twenty years, but this special one has endured almost five hundred years!!! Furthermore, in Our Lady's eyes are the figures of the four men in the room where she appeared on Juan's tilma. Juan's face is the clearest and largest of them all. Moreover, when the tilma's temperature was checked, it was 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit, the normal temperature of a human

body. On Our Lady's cloak were forty-six stars, the same number of constellations visible in the skies on her last apparition.

Juan Diego's courageous persistence, willingness, and faithfulness to obeying the Mother of God made a positive, eternal impact on Mexico and the Catholic Church. He was canonized on July 31, 2002 by Pope John Paul II in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The very same tilma that Blessed Mother appeared on converted millions of Aztecs to Christianity, abandoning their pagan beliefs of sacrificing their children to false gods. In addition to transforming Mexico, the faith of the universal Church was strengthened and is still being fortified today as we celebrate Juan Diego's feast day on December 9th and Our Lady of Guadalupe's feast on December 12th. Thanks to Juan Diego, Mary's special messenger, Our Lady of Guadalupe is the patroness of Mexico, the Americas, and the unborn!

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