



Our Lady of Guadalupe:

A Refuge to Many, a Feast for All to Celebrate

Timothy Matovina

One of the most memorable Guadalupe liturgies in which I participated was the *serenata* (serenade), celebrated on the eve of the December 12 feast at San Antonio's San Fernando Cathedral. The festivity and fervor of the event inundated the senses—bright colors, the aroma of fresh flowers, the excitement of the crowd, and the service of emotive singing. But the most impressive moment was the reenactment of Guadalupe's apparitions to St. Juan Diego. True to this foundational narrative of Mexican and Mexican-American faith, the first bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga, was portrayed as skeptical when he first heard Juan Diego's message that Guadalupe wanted a temple built in her honor. The scoffing of the bishop's assistants elicited agonizing wincing from some onlookers, stony silence from others. As the

Devotees to Our Lady of Guadalupe attest that she uplifts them, as she did Juan Diego, strengthening them in their struggles and hardships.

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story unfolds, the bishop comes to believe when the stooped *indio* stands erect, drops out-of-season roses from his *tilma* (cloak), and presents the image of Guadalupe that miraculously appeared on the *tilma*. As the repentant bishop and his assistants fell to their knees in veneration, applause erupted throughout the cathedral.

Such dramatic reenactments of Juan Diego's encounters with Our Lady of Guadalupe are one of the most common ritual practices at parish celebrations of her feast. Thus, liturgical leaders do well to familiarize themselves with the *Nican mopohua* (a title derived from the document's first words, "here is recounted"), a Nahuatl-language account of the apparitions that devotees acclaim as the foundational text of the Guadalupe tradition.

The text narrates Juan Diego's tender encounters with Guadalupe, whose first words to him were "dignified Juan, dignified Juan Diego." She sent him to request that Bishop Zumárraga build a temple at Tepeyac (in present-day Mexico City), where she "will show and give to all people all my love, my compassion, my help, and my protection." In one of the most moving passages of the narrative, Juan Diego returned to her from an unsuccessful interview with the bishop and asked that she send another messenger "who is respected and esteemed" because he deemed himself too unworthy. Her response was tender but firm: "Know well in your heart that there are not a few of my servants and messengers to whom I could give the mandate of taking my thought and my word so that my will may be accomplished. But it is absolutely necessary that you personally go and speak about this, and that precisely through your mediation and help, my wish and my desire be realized." Her words to Juan Diego when he was troubled about the illness of his uncle, Juan Bernardino, are the most quoted among contemporary devotees: "Do not let your countenance and heart be troubled; do not fear that sickness or any other sickness or anxiety. Am I not here, your mother?"¹

GUADALUPE AND HER FAITHFUL

Celebrating the story of Guadalupe's maternal care and Juan Diego's struggle and triumph does not obliterate the painful daily realities of numerous devotees. Many have stinging memories of the polite disdain or outright hostility they have met in their dealings with sales clerks, bosses, coworkers, teachers, police officers, health care providers, social workers, government employees, professional colleagues, and even religious leaders. Thus, it is not surprising that they resonate with the ritual enactment of Juan Diego's rejection, his election as an unexpected hero, his unwavering faith, and his final vindication. Numerous devotees attest that Guadalupe uplifts them as she did Juan Diego, strengthening them in their trials and difficulties. In a word, they confess that the Guadalupe narrative is true: it reveals the deep truth of their human dignity and exposes the lie of experiences that diminish their fundamental sense of worth.

Theological writings about Guadalupe spanning more than three and a half centuries are consistent with this intuition of the faithful. Strikingly, from the first published theological work on Guadalupe, Miguel Sánchez's influential 1648 book *Imagen de la Virgen María*, down to the present, those who have explored the theological meaning of Guadalupe have not focused primarily on typical Marian topics, such as her title *Theotokos* ("God bearer" or Mother of God), her perpetual virginity, Immaculate Conception, or Assumption. Rather, theologians have examined the Guadalupe image, the apparitions' account, and its historical context as a means to explore the collision of civilizations between the Old and the New Worlds and the ongoing implications of this clash for Christianity in the Americas and beyond. Today Guadalupe is most frequently associated with both the struggle to overcome the negative effects of the conquest of the Americas and the hope for a new future of greater justice, faith, and evangelization. Theologies of Guadalupe are thus an ongoing effort to articulate a Christian response to one of the most momentous events of Christianity's second millennium:



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Numerous devotees of Our Lady of Guadalupe see a mother who will never let them down and to whom they can pour out their hearts' concerns.

the conquest, evangelization, and struggles for life, dignity, and self-determination of the peoples of the Americas.²

Understanding Guadalupe within this broad context is crucial for liturgical leaders preparing celebrations of her feast. Also essential is appreciating how this context shapes the depths of what she means to her faithful daughters and sons. In her study of Guadalupe in the lives of Mexican-American women, Jeanette Rodriguez reports that when she asked an indigenous woman in Mexico what makes Guadalupe different from other images of Mary, the woman simply responded *se quedó* (she stayed).³ Like this woman, numerous devotees are attracted to Guadalupe because they see someone who has ever been with them and with their people. They see a mother who will never let them down and to whom they can freely pour out their hearts' concerns. What matters most is not that their prayers are always answered in the manner desired, but that they see in Guadalupe's face someone who cares about them, someone who is ever willing to listen. In a word, what they see in Guadalupe's face is faithfulness, a mother and a presence that never abandons them. For many, the core experience of Guadalupe is the replication of Juan Diego's intimate, mystical encounter with their celestial mother. In innumerable conversations, prayers, and sustained gazes at her image, devotees relive this mystical encounter. Thus, one of the most important liturgical preparations for the Guadalupe feast is to establish an attractive space where devotees can approach their celestial mother. A common practice is to have a procession—often at the conclusion of the Eucharist—during which congregants present roses to Guadalupe with their prayers.

Yet—and perhaps somewhat ironically—Guadalupe's constant protection of her people presents one of the greatest challenges for celebrations in her honor. Some pastors and liturgists have bemoaned that Guadalupan and other "popular devotions are nothing more than 'a Catholicism of a day' . . . stressing great but isolated moments of fervor, yet failing to translate into deep and lasting spiritual transformation and sustained



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In showing how Our Lady of Guadalupe brought the Good News of her son, the homilist can link the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the season of Advent.

participation in the life of the church.” One priest with half a century of experience in Hispanic ministry asserted that many devotees seem “locked into” their “attraction to the Virgin [of Guadalupe] as a source of favors” and pay scant attention to living out the discipleship and evangelization Church leaders proclaim as Guadalupe’s call to her devotees.⁴ Such statements accentuate the most enduring pastoral challenge of Guadalupan veneration and liturgical celebration: devotees’ tendency to focus on the favors Guadalupe bestows rather than on the life of discipleship to which she summons her faithful. The first Guadalupan pastoral manual, Luis Laso de la Vega’s 1649 work *Huei tlamahuicoltica*, enumerated various miracles of Guadalupe on behalf of the native peoples and all those who turn to her. But it emphasized even more that the proper response to Guadalupe’s maternal care is to live as daughters and sons who express their gratitude by following the commands of her son Jesus Christ. Laso de la Vega’s entreaty that pastoral leaders guide devotees beyond seeking favors to seeking deeper faith commitment is as timely today as ever.⁵

PARISH GUADALUPE CELEBRATIONS

One effective way to address this concern is to help devotees link Guadalupe’s feast day with the Advent season in which it falls.⁶ The origins of the feast date back to 1754, when Pope Benedict XIV established December 12 as its date on the liturgical calendar. In 1988, leaders of the *Instituto Nacional de Liturgia Hispana* worked with the Subcommittee on Hispanic Liturgy of the US Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy (now the Committee on Divine Worship) to successfully petition the Vatican to elevate annual Guadalupe liturgical celebrations from the rank of “memorial” to “feast” in the United States.⁷ Then at the request of the 1997 Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops, Pope John Paul II declared it an official liturgical feast for all the Americas. Along with the general option of choosing readings from the Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary, for the Guadalupe feast the Lectionary used in the United States has specific options for the Gospel and the First Reading that are clearly consistent with the Advent theme of joyfully preparing the way for

the Lord’s coming: the Annunciation (Luke 1:26–38), the Visitation with the first line of the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:39–47), and Zechariah 2:14–17, which begins “Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! See, I am coming to dwell among you, says the Lord.” When the Guadalupe apparitions are dramatically re-enacted before Mass or after the Gospel—or even when they are not—the meaning of the apparitions can be interwoven with the liturgy and the Advent season. For example, one homilist I heard developed the insight that, just as Mary visited Elizabeth and shared the Good News of Christ, so Guadalupe visited Juan Diego—and through him the peoples of America—to bring her maternal love and the good news of her son. The homilist then went on to call us to live the spirituality of Advent: awaiting in joy the coming of Christ as Mary and her kinswoman Elizabeth did and imitating them in announcing the good news of his coming, just as Our Lady of Guadalupe did to Juan Diego and he in turn did to others.⁸

Guadalupe’s call to discipleship can be further accentuated through building a strong relationship between the Eucharist and expressions of Guadalupan devotion. Preachers have sought to link the Eucharist, the assigned Scripture texts for the feast, and the narrative of Guadalupe’s encounters with Juan Diego. In a Homily, Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ, observed that the relation between Guadalupe and her faithful “is sometimes simply that of a loving mother who literally lavishes care and concern on her needy children.” He contended that this is only half the meaning of Guadalupe, since “the story of Tepeyac,” like the Gospel accounts of the Annunciation and the Visitation, “graphically portrays the central role of love and service in our Christian lives.” Exhorting his listeners to put into action their gratitude for the gift of God’s love offered in their mother Guadalupe and in the Eucharist, he concluded: “Seized and saturated by such love, what will be our response to others, especially those most in need?”⁹

Devotional practices present yet another opportunity for proclaiming Guadalupe’s call to discipleship. The most widespread communal devotion for the Guadalupe feast is *las mañanitas* (literally “morning songs”), a tribute usually begun before dawn. In many parishes it leads into the feast-day Mass. Devotees’ offering of flowers expresses their love and thanks to their mother. Accompanying the song tributes are devotions such as the praying of the Rosary, Scripture readings, and testimonies or meditations about Guadalupe. Resounding in the song offerings are sentiments of joyful veneration, such as the beginning and ending of the traditional hymn “*Buenos Días, Paloma Blanca*” (“Good Morning, White Dove”): “*Buenos días, Paloma Blanca, hoy te vengo a saludar. . . . Recibe estas mañanitas, de mi humilde corazón*” (Good morning, White Dove, today I come to greet you. . . . Receive these *mañanitas* from my humble heart).¹⁰ Most of Guadalupe’s faithful know these songs by heart and resonate with their emphases on thanking her, seeking her blessing and protection, and acclaiming her motherhood, purity, and miraculous apparitions to Juan Diego. Sacred dances called *matachines* are also offered to Guadalupe, sometimes within the Eucharist itself during the Entrance procession, the Presentation of the Gifts, or after Communion.

The specific contours of such practices vary from community to community, but in every parish, they provide opportunities to creatively engage the people's faith expressions. Liturgical leaders should take care not merely to co-opt devotees' traditions, but to respectfully join them in their veneration, even as they help bring out its deeper significance. Since there is no single order of worship for a *las mañanitas* celebration, liturgists can help plan prayers, personal faith testimonies, Scripture readings, and/or meditations in a manner that complements the traditional songs. These enhancements should be brief so as to not detract from the song tribute that comprises the core faith expression of this event. But when done well, these additional worship elements help devotees deepen their appreciation of their traditions. For example, expressing profoundly our Catholic understanding of anamnesis, lay leader Socorro Durán presented a moving meditation for *las mañanitas* at her parish. She reminded those struggling with illness, poverty, unemployment, inadequate education, a lack of legal status, insecurity, or any kind of discouragement or difficulty that our times are "not that different" from Mexico at the time of Juan Diego or the time of Jesus 2,000 years ago. In Durán's words, our ancestors of those past days "didn't have many reasons to hope either." But just as Christ's birth and Juan Diego's encounter with Guadalupe were both "a sudden, unexpected event which then and now brings hope and expectation to us," so too the Guadalupe feast "renews hope in our wilting spirits" and enables us to be instruments of Christ and our mother Guadalupe for a world in need of healing.¹¹

Some parishes enact bilingual celebrations to extend Guadalupe's evangelizing message to non-Latinos and to Latinos—especially the young—who are not proficient in Spanish. Opting for such a celebration must be done with careful pastoral discernment, lest devotees be left with the sense that their traditional feast has been taken from them. Hispanic leaders should be fully involved in any such decision-making process. An approach that suits some parish contexts is to conduct a service like *las mañanitas* in Spanish and then celebrate a bilingual Eucharist, with Spanish as the primary language as the situation warrants. In worship communities where leaders decide on a bilingual celebration of the Eucharist, the usual guidelines for such celebrations apply. First and foremost, as Mark Francis, *csj*, has noted, the primary purpose of such liturgies is "not to celebrate cultural diversity" but "to help each member of the assembly participate fully, actively and consciously in the liturgy." Recommendations to enact this vision include making the words of the prayers and Scripture readings accessible to as many as possible; avoiding excessive translated duplication of spoken words through skillful use of language and printed worship aids; and paying attention to nonverbal communications



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such as art, environment, symbol, gesture, and prayerful silence. Pastoral musicians who form bilingual choirs can also greatly enliven such celebrations, provided they make sure to highlight some of the traditional hymns many devotees sing with full voice on their mother Guadalupe's feast.¹²

One of the most difficult challenges for parish liturgy occurs in years when December 12 falls on a Sunday. Of course, Catholic liturgical norms state that Sunday Mass has precedence over feast days, in this case the Mass for the Third Sunday of Advent. Some pastors have allowed a December 12 Mass for the feast. Others have made a compromise decision of a celebration that is either subsumed into the Sunday Advent liturgy or does not interfere with the regular Sunday Mass schedule, either an alternative Sunday Mass time or celebrating on a day other than Sunday. Whatever approach is used, pastors and liturgical coordinators do well to address this concern well in advance and involve

Hispanic parish leaders in their deliberations. Whatever the final decision, in communities with fervent Guadalupan devotees, it is pastorally desirable to find some way to worthily celebrate the Guadalupe feast.

A FEAST FOR ALL

While Guadalupan devotion is most conspicuous among ethnic Mexicans, the Guadalupe feast is for all. Two-thirds of Hispanics in the United States are of Mexican heritage, but pastoral leaders from other Hispanic groups, such as Colombian émigré Fanny Tabares, remind us about the need to address intra-Hispanic relations in ethnically mixed Latino communities. Tabares notes that South Americans in the United States are "a minority group within the Hispanic community" who make great sacrifices to "accept as their own customs which, though Hispanic, originated in countries not their own." Many participate in the religious traditions of other Hispanic groups, especially the predominant Guadalupe feast, and can be chagrined at the comparatively tepid appreciation for Catholic feasts from their countries of origin. Every Spanish-speaking country in Latin America and the Caribbean, along with Portuguese-speaking Brazil, has a national Marian patroness. Particularly in worship communities that encompass diverse Hispanic groups, recognition of this diversity of Marian traditions through creative Marian litanies, other prayers, or allusions in Homilies can help unite diverse Hispanic communities in their celebration of the Guadalupe feast.¹³

Moreover, non-Latino Catholics increasingly embrace Guadalupan devotion. St. Mark the Evangelist parish in San Antonio is one of a growing number of primarily Euro-American parishes that prominently celebrate the Guadalupe feast. Within a few years of beginning this annual celebration, the parish Guadalupana devotional society grew from twelve mostly Hispanic



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Liturgies for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the United States present an opportunity to show all people Our Lady's love, compassion, and protection.

members to nearly 140, both men and women, nearly half of them European Americans.¹⁴ Liturgical leaders do well to encourage trends such as these in parishes with diverse populations.

Guadalupe is a source of collective pride for ethnic Mexicans and she has enabled many to deepen their faith and sense of human dignity. Yet those very devotees are often the first to acclaim Guadalupe as a mother whose care extends to all her children from every background. Liturgies for the Guadalupe feast in US parishes present a vital pastoral opportunity to help write the next chapter in the history of the Guadalupe tradition, one in which her stated intent to “show and give to all people all my love, my compassion, my help, and my protection” can be more fully realized.¹⁵ ♦

Notes

1. Citations are taken from a *Nican mopohua* translation into English popular among Guadalupan devotees in Virgilio Elizondo, *Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1997), 5–22, quotations at 7, 8, 10, 14–16.

2. Miguel Sánchez, *Imagen de la Virgen María . . .* (Mexico City: Viuda de Bernardo Calderón, 1648), as reprinted in *Testimonios históricos Guadalupanos*, ed. Ernesto de la Torre Villar and Ramiro Navarro de Anda (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982), 152–267; Timothy Matovina, “Theologies of Guadalupe: From the Spanish Colonial Era to Pope John Paul II,” *Theological Studies* 70 (March 2009): 61–91.

3. Jeanette Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 128.

4. Bishops' Committee on Hispanic Affairs, *Hispanic Ministry at the Turn of the New Millennium* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1999), On-Site Interview section, no. 6; Father John Koelsch, letter to the author, 22 September 2009.

5. Luis Laso de la Vega, *Huei tlamahuiçoltica . . .* (Mexico City: Imprenta de Juan Ruiz, 1649), reprinted with an English translation in *The Story of Guadalupe: Luis Laso de la Vega's Huei tlamahuiçoltica of*

1649, ed. and trans. Lisa Sousa, Stafford Poole, and James Lockhart (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Timothy Matovina, “The First Guadalupan Pastoral Manual: Luis Laso de la Vega's *Huei tlamahuiçoltica* (1649),” *Horizons: The Journal of the College Theology Society* 40 (December 2013): 159–77.

6. Maxwell Johnson, “Celebrations of the Virgin of Guadalupe,” chap. 4 in *The Virgin of Guadalupe: Theological Reflections of an Anglo-Lutheran Liturgist* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Johnson, “The Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Season of Advent,” *Worship* 78, no. 6 (2004): 482–99.

7. Arturo J. Pérez, “The History of Hispanic Liturgy since 1965,” in *Hispanic Catholic Culture in the U.S.: Issues and Concerns*, ed. Jay P. Dolan and Allan Figueroa Deck (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 375.

8. For another example of how to link Guadalupe to the Advent season, see Rosa María Icaza, ccvi, “Who Can Help Us Better to Prepare for Christmas?” in *The Treasure of Guadalupe*, ed. Virgilio Elizondo, Allan Figueroa Deck, and Timothy Matovina (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 39–43.

9. Allan Figueroa Deck, “Seized and Saturated by Gift: Living for Others,” in *The Treasure of Guadalupe*, ed. Elizondo, Deck, and Matovina, 11–17, quotations at 12, 13, 17.

10. “*Buenos Días, Paloma Blanca*” is found in a variety of Spanish and bilingual hymnals, such as *Cantos del Pueblo de Dios*, 2nd ed. (Franklin Park: World Library Publications, 2001); *Flor y Canto*, 3rd ed. (Portland: OCP Publications, 2011). Other songs for the Guadalupe feast can also be found in these sources.

11. Socorro Durán, “A Great Sign Appeared in the Sky,” in *The Treasure of Guadalupe*, ed. Elizondo, Deck, and Matovina, 97–100, quotations at 97–8.

12. Mark R. Francis, *Shape a Circle Ever Wider: Liturgical Inculturation in the United States* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2000), 103–108, quotations at 103; Francis, *Guidelines for Multicultural Celebrations* (Washington, DC: Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, 1998).

13. Fanny Tabares, “Pastoral Care of Catholic South Americans Living in the United States,” *Chicago Studies* 36 (December 1997): 269–81, quotations at 275, 279. See also *Mary Throughout Latin America* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications 2005).

14. J. Michael Parker, “Lady of Guadalupe Crosses Cultural Lines,” *San Antonio Express*, December 11, 2006.

15. Elizondo, *Guadalupe*, 8.

Timothy Matovina is a professor of theology and executive director of the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church* (Princeton, 2012) and is the editor of *Virgilio Elizondo: Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010).

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