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Our Lady of Guadalupe A New World Image of the Trinity*

*Virgilio Elizondo***

This presentation has been developed from the perspective of a pastor who seeks to relate the truths of Christian tradition to the wounds and pains of today's humanity. What does our tradition, especially our beloved and cherished tradition of *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, have to offer to our people today?

It will be my conclusion that one of the great gifts Our Lady of Guadalupe offers to Christianity is a new and very powerful way of allowing us to imagine one of the most beautiful and fundamental elements of our faith: The Most Blessed Trinity. She does not offer a new dogma or a new teaching, but simply a new and exciting way of penetrating into our understanding and appreciation of this deep mystery of our faith, a way which allows this often obscure doctrine to become a meaningful, saving and life-giving message in today's world, a way which illuminates the way for a society that in many ways is self-destructing, especially through the breakdown of the family

*This article is based on some of the published works of Virgilio Elizondo, namely: (Spanish) *La Morenita: Evangelizadora de las Américas* (San Antonio, Tex.: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1992); (English) *Guadalupe, Mother of the New Creation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997; 3rd printing, February 1998); (Spanish) *Guadalupe, Madre de la Nueva Creación* (Navarra, España: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1999); (Italian) *Guadalupe, Madre della nuova creazione* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1st ed., March 2000); (German) *Unsere Liebe Frau von Guadalupe* (Luzern: Genossenschaft Edition Exodus, 1999).

**Father Virgilio Elizondo, a priest of the archdiocese of San Antonio, Texas, founded the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC) and served as its first president (1972-1987). From 1983 to 1995, he was rector of San Antonio's San Fernando Cathedral. A prolific author, he currently serves as director of programming for San Antonio's Catholic television station.

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household. This is the great gift of the New World to the entire Christian family.

But to arrive at this conclusion, I must take you through a lengthy road. Please bear with me as I retell the story, so as to bring out some of its liberating and salvific message.

1. Importance Today

Among the sacred sites of the world—such as Mecca, Jerusalem, Lourdes and others, the sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe at Tepeyac in the outskirts of Mexico City is one of the most visited shrines in the world. It is estimated that over thirteen million pilgrims a year make their way to this sacred site. But people do not only flock to her shrine at Tepeyac, they also reproduce her in their art, songs, home shrines, murals, and even tattoos on their bodies. Festivals in her honor are among the most popular in Mexico, the United States and many other regions of the hemisphere. People consistently give powerful testimonies of favors granted through her intercession.

The development of the devotion itself is quite fascinating. Its exact origins, like that of all great religions, is somewhat clouded, but there is no doubt about its existence. Our Lady of Guadalupe has gone from being condemned as diabolical by the early Franciscan missionaries to being proclaimed the lodestar of the first evangelization by Pope John Paul II. She is not a dogma of faith, but she is certainly among the most tender, beautiful, consoling and influential truths of our faith. Judging from the effects she has had since her first apparitions in 1531, I would dare say that Guadalupe is one of the most important events in the history of Christianity since Pentecost, and thus has unlimited possibilities and challenges for creative theological reflection and pastoral action.

So, with this brief introduction, let us look at the event in the context of its time and space. For just as in the Incarnation and life of Jesus every detail is part of the revelation, so in the Guadalupe event, every detail is part of the revelation which becomes saving truth for America and for humanity.

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2. The Time and Space: The Uniqueness of the Moment

a. Two Halves: An Unequal Encounter

Try to picture that moment of history. Neither of the two halves of the planet had suspected the existence of one another. Asia, Africa and Europe had somewhat known about each other, but they had not suspected the existence of other continents. America and Oceania, as they are now called, had been developing for thousands of years without suspecting the existence of other continents. Each continent had developed in different ways with totally different anthropologies and cosmologies. Beginning in 1492, the two halves of the world began to meet! It was an encounter of peoples who had never suspected the existence of one another! What an incredible surprise and shock it must have been. But the encounter was not one among equals. The Europeans were superior in one very important way: they possessed weapons of war, terror and destruction and did not hesitate to use them to intimidate, punish, and enslave the natives of the world they had newly discovered. But the greatest terror they brought was that of new diseases. This was not intentional, but it would bring about the greatest devastation of the natives.

b. 1521: The Great Clash

Beginning in 1519, the two great empires of that moment of history—Spain and the Aztec Empire—encountered each other in Mexico. At first, there was mutual fascination (except for the body smells of the Spaniards which nauseated the native Mexicans), but this quickly changed as the greed, cruelty and promiscuity of the Spaniards shocked and scandalized the natives. Both were greatly developed peoples, but both had fatal defects which caused them to be mutually scandalized by one another. The Spaniards were scandalized by the Aztec practice of human sacrifice, while the native Mexicans were scandalized by the quick and easy way in which the Spaniards killed anyone who got in their way. The manner in which each took the lives of others was a source of mutual scandal.

The great tensions between the two came to a final clash in August, 1521, when, after the final battles at Tlatelolco, native Mexico was defeated and the Mexican people retreated into

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the silent, suffering people they have become. It was not just a military defeat, but the defeat of an entire way of life, of an entire system of beliefs, values and traditions. This was not just a battle lost, but the massacre and death of a people, condemned henceforth to a life of perpetual inferiority and silence.

c. Efforts to Evangelize

The military conquest was accompanied by the great efforts to evangelize. To us today, this seems like an incredible contradiction, but it was very logical according to the mentality of the time which had just brought to an end the era of the Crusades. In fact, evangelization was one of the goals of the conquest.

The European discovery of new lands coincided with the first efforts to renew the Church in Europe. The great fervor for evangelical renewal, promoted by great men like Cardinal Cisneros, was immediately transferred to the “new world”—it opened up incredible opportunities to bring the entire world to Christ. The first missionaries who came to America were among the most holy and well prepared. The evangelizing efforts of the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and, later on, the Jesuits were carefully planned and designed by the best and most apostolic minds of the time. They were convinced that here in these new territories a new Christianity could be initiated which would avoid the deviations of the Christianity of Europe—deviations which the reforms would seek to correct. The creativity and vigor of the evangelization programs initiated by the first missionaries made them the most fascinating in the history of Christianity. Yet these programs met with insurmountable obstacles.

d. Obstacles to Evangelization

In the midst of this human disaster, the missionaries—among the best the Christian world had known—found it difficult, if not impossible, to evangelize. The memory of the painful events of the conquest, the cruelty of the post-conquest years and the horrible example of the European “Christian” men (or better yet, as John Paul II has referred to the people of this period: “so-called Christians”), who were obsessed with gold and sex, made the Christian message incomprehensible. What

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scandalized the natives the most was the irresponsible promiscuity of the Spaniards: they raped women or took them on as sexual companions, fathered children and abandoned both the mother and their children. This was unthinkable to the native world. This was the great, sinful beginning of the New World and, unfortunately, one of the great sources of suffering of today's world: abandoned women with children. Even today, women are often abused, ignored by the men who abused them and thrown out of their family homes because, it is said, they have brought shame to the household! The abandonment of pregnant women is one of the great scandals and sources of suffering in contemporary Latin America. It is important to keep this image well in mind: irresponsible fathers, abused women and abandoned children. This scenario became the general trend in much of Latin American society. Many individuals suffer the deep scars of knowing who their fathers are, but of having these fathers refuse to claim or even to recognize them.

Added to the harsh conditions of the moment was the very negative imagery of God that was popular at that time. The emphasis was on the God of power, judgment and punishment; God was presented as the harsh and unbending father who would punish without mercy even the smallest infraction of the law.

Finally, there was the obstacle of incommunicability. The two humanities that met had totally different world views, which included totally different ways of viewing and relating with the sacred. Europe was into reason and logic; Mexico was into flower and song. Europe was into dogmas; Mexico was into dreams and omens. Europe was into the salvation of one's soul; Mexico was into the salvation of the peoples' soul. It was not just a matter of translation, but one of two totally different ways of understanding the structure of reality, of creation and of God.

e. 1531: The Great Breakthrough: Our Lady of Guadalupe

The great and unexpected breakthrough came in December of 1531, at Tepeyac, the site of the ancient goddess of life, To-

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nanzin. Tepeyac had been one of the ancient *altepetls* of Mexico—the sacred mountain from which the ancestors dispensed hearts. Here, in the periphery of the great and imperial Tenochtitlan, where the capitol and cathedral of New Spain were being built by the forced labor of the natives, an irruption would take place which would conquer not through brutal force but through the power of tenderness and love.

3. The Story: Not an Apparition But a Personal Encounter

The story, as it has come down to us, is encased in a very carefully elaborated Nahuatl poem, very much like chapters one and two of the Gospel according to St. Luke. It uses native imagery and expressions to indicate this is a divine revelation. As European historians were recording their version of the conquest, the *Nicān Mopohua* is the indigenous account of the ultimate victory of what at the moment appeared as a colossal defeat. Very much like the book of Genesis or the final resurrection accounts of the gospels, it is a creation/redemption narrative of the new life which will be offered to everyone, through the mediation of the defeated and oppressed people.

The story is so simple that young children re-enact it easily, yet it is so profound that theologians, historians of religion and anthropologists are just beginning to discern its deeper and fuller meaning

The account begins in a very precise way, ten years after the conquest, when the Mexican nations had surrendered to Spain. Juan Diego, a lower class Indian (the text is very precise on this point), is leaving home while it is still dark. He arrives at the *altepetl* of Tepeyac just at the beginning of dawn. He hears the beautiful singing of the birds; he is startled and wonders where he is—perhaps in the land of his ancestors, where truth originates and resides; he hears a voice calling him by name to the top. As he ascends the hill, all the stones, brush and plants appear as precious stones. The voice is coming from a Lady who radiates the sun; she speaks with him tenderly and asks him to be her messenger to the Bishop, with the mandate that she wants a temple built on this spot where she can show

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all her love and compassion to all her children, all the inhabitants of this land.

Juan Diego goes to the Bishop, but has difficulty getting in to see him. Finally, he gets in and presents the Lady's mandate. As we could easily expect, he was not believed. He returns to the Lady with deep feelings of rejection, inferiority and unworthiness. He wants her to send someone important, someone who is credible, but the Lady insists that he—the smallest of her children—must be her chosen messenger. The next day, Juan Diego returns to the Bishop; again, he has trouble getting in, but this time the Bishop is impressed and asks him to ask the Lady for a sign. Juan Diego returns to the Lady and asks her for the sign. She tells him to return the next day and she will have the sign ready for him.

When Juan Diego goes home, he discovers that his uncle, Juan Bernardino, is dying (at this moment, many of the natives were dying of the plague—one of the new diseases which came with the Conquest). Juan Diego decides to bypass the Lady and go for a priest to hear his uncle's confession. Taking a different route, so as to avoid the Lady from heaven, he is startled when he sees her coming to meet him. She assures him his uncle will not die of this sickness and that he is to go to the top of Tepeyac hill where he will find the sign the Bishop requested. He ascends the hill and finds it covered with beautiful flowers from Castille. He cuts them, brings them to the Lady and she arranges them on his mantle.

Juan Diego rushes to the Bishop's palace and, when he finally gets to see the Bishop, he opens his mantle (*tilma*) and the flowers drop to the floor. As the Bishop and his household were admiring the beautiful flowers which were totally out of season, the image of Our Lady appeared on the *tilma* and has remained there to this day.

They then went to visit the uncle and discovered that at the exact time the Lady had told Juan Diego that his uncle would not die, she had likewise appeared to the uncle and healed him. This was the first of the countless miracles which have been attributed to her. Her image was then taken to Mexico City and the entire city came to venerate the precious image.

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4. Message within the Story: Darkness . . . Dawn

a. The Story's Opening: Beautiful Singing

The Nahuatl world spoke of divine revelation as "flower and song"; for, only in the context of beauty which was seen and heard could the divine be experienced. Furthermore, birds were considered as mediators between heaven and earth. So, as the story begins with singing birds, it puts us in the context of the beginning of a divine communication which will be completed only at the end when the flowers bring the story to its climax.

In verses 16 and 22 of the *Nicān Mopohua*, the Lady appears as one of perfect beauty, yet very much one of their own. In verse 22, she presents herself as virgin and mother. As such, she restores her people to their original dignity (destroyed by the Conquest) and rehabilitates their pain and the shame which came with the rape of their women and the psychological castration suffered by their men, at seeing their women raped and being unable to do anything about it.

This heavenly-earthly mother (the blue-green of her mantle is heavenly, while the brownish-red of her gown is earthly) was a temple. For the native world, a temple indicated a way of life and the external building was simply the center of this new way of life. What the Lady wants is a way of life where love and compassion will reign for all the inhabitants of the land.

b. First Conversion: Juan Diego

Juan Diego, the lower class Indian who sees himself as ignorant, unworthy, even as a non-human, is now converted into a confident messenger of the Mother of God. He is a human being with a mission. He is no longer a nobody, but is now a trusted messenger. In this, we see the fulfillment of the words of Mary in the Magnificat: "the downtrodden will be uplifted."

c. Second Conversion: Juan Bernardino

In the healing of the uncle, Juan Bernardino, is the resurrection of a people. In the old Nahuatl world, the cultural inheritance was passed on through the uncle. At that historical moment, the evangelization process was largely involved in trying to wipe out much of the native culture, for whatever

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was not understood was considered diabolical and needed to be eliminated. The rehabilitation of Juan Bernardino is the rehabilitation of the native culture; it would not die, but rather be rehabilitated and survive through the mediation of Our Lady, the mother and giver of life.

d. Third Conversion: Bishop Juan Zumárraga and His Household (Church)

We have always seen the Guadalupe event as the beginning of the conversion of the native Mexicans. However, the deeper and more difficult conversion was that of the Bishop and the Church. The Bishop goes from being a confident teacher, to a reluctant listener; he moves from repentance to joining the project of the poor. In this action, the Church joins the struggles of the poor, the marginalized, the despised of the land and the rejected, in their quest for dignity, belonging and inclusion. Her temple will be a home for all the inhabitants of this land—all without exception.

At the same time that the Church was beginning to undergo major reforms in Europe, Our Lady of Guadalupe calls the new Church beginning in America to a truly evangelical way of being and understanding. (We will develop this point in the next section.)

e. The Story's Closing: Flowers and Image

The story closes with the miraculous flowers, and the narrative emphasizes that they were flowers from Castille. First of all, the flowers indicate that the divine communication is now complete—*Flor y canto*. But the emphasis of the flowers from Castille, irrupting out of the ancient Altepétl of Tepeyac, brings out that the new Christian religion will indeed flourish in these new territories, but it will arise out of the native American soil. It will not be a foreign religion imposed upon the people, one that demands the abandonment of their ancient beliefs and customs, but one which will ennoble and enrich what has been passed on through generations. It will also purify and ennoble the Christianity which had been brought over from Europe, with its emphasis on judgment, punishment and hell. Instead, it will offer compassion, love and defense.

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Finally, the Image itself guarantees the ongoing presence of the tender and loving mother of all the inhabitants of this land. It is truly the beginning of Christianity out of the American soil and the beginning of the third great tradition of Christianity—the East, the West and, now, the American!

5. Comments for Theological Reflection

a. Saving Truth

For the Guadalupe message, saving truth cannot be reduced to abstract, isolated and doctrinal truth. For truth to be salvific, it must be relational, interconnected, visual, melodic and beautiful. It is through *Flor y canto* that we enter into the experience of the sacred and that divine truth irrupts from within the deepest recesses of our being. Furthermore, it is the image-word that best mirrors, manifests and makes evident the truths about the mystery of God.

b. Evangelizing Pedagogy

The good news of our salvation comes through personal conversation which allows the one hearing the message to come in contact with his/her most basic humanity as created by God. To be effective, evangelization, as we learn from the Guadalupe dynamics, must be beautiful, conversational, respectful, empowering and compassionate. It is through the healing of the wounds of the heart that one is rehabilitated. This type of evangelization allows persons, especially those put down by society, to discover that they are fully human; it allows them to discover the good and beautiful within themselves that society has denied. Thus, it is truly Good News!

c. GOD—Mestizo God

From the very beginning (v. 22 of the *Nican Mopohua*), Our Lady of Guadalupe combines the Spanish vocabulary for God with the Native Mexican vocabulary for God into a new and more expressive notion of God. She combines what was incomprehensible to the natives with what was abominable to the Spaniards, thus saying that she is the one Mother of God who is known to various peoples in different ways. She combines these different approaches in a very enriching way.

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One of the most beautiful aspects of the Guadalupe message is that it both corrects and enriches the God imagery both of Spanish Catholicism and of the ancient Mexican religions. It purifies the ancient Mexican religions of their blood-thirsty gods, while affirming the beautiful and positive aspect of these religions. At the same time, it purifies and corrects Spanish Catholicism of its excessive emphasis on God's harsh judgment and cruel punishment for sins, by bringing out the compassion of God through the words of the Mother of God. She balances the image of God as all-powerful and all-loving.

d. New World Imagery of the Trinity?

Let me be very clear: The New World is not offering a new doctrine or a new dogma, but I do think it can help us to see ancient doctrines in a new way which will make them ever more meaningful and powerful in today's world.

Here now, in my mind, are the most beautiful and powerful gifts of Guadalupe. The Old World imaged the most beautiful revelation and teaching of our Faith: that God is not isolationist but relational—three-in-one, through the trinitarian imagery of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This imagery made the reality of God very personal to us, and we were able to appreciate that the ultimate life of God was in relationship. This in turn is true for us also; the ultimate truth of our lives is not in our accomplishments but in our relationships of family, friends and community.

The deepest wound of the new humanity, of the so-called New World, was that of abused women, abandoned children and irresponsible, run-away fathers. Unfortunately, these cruel realities continue today. Our Lady of Guadalupe, who introduced herself as Mother of all the inhabitants of this land, sent her child Juan Diego to the Bishop, the spiritual father of the *conquistadores* who were abusing and abandoning the women, to invite him to come to her and build a home, a true household. What is the deeper meaning of this? Our Lady is the Mother who sends the Child to invite the Father to become a homebuilder. This could well be a new way of imaging this holy teaching which would have a powerful healing and salvific meaning in today's world.

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6. Closing

Living the life of God means living in the proper relationships as revealed in the Holy Trinity, and there is no holier or more effective space for the production of holiness than a loving and caring household made up of Mother, Children and Father. If this is missing, the best socio-political or even ecclesial structures will fail and crumble. This proper relationship, which was totally missing and even denied at the beginning of the new humanity of America, is what Our Lady of Guadalupe asks for and seeks to bring about. She does not tell Juan Diego to build a temple, but to go to the Bishop-Father and invite him, at her request to build a household! This will be the very foundation stone of the real temple that the Lady wants and the one that will truly radiate the ultimate truth of God: the loving relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, seen and experienced in the loving relationship of Mother-Children-Father! The New Temple which Our Lady wants for the hemisphere is not a physical church-building, but land without separating borders, a land where all her children, all the inhabitants of this land, can live in justice and harmony together. An American hemisphere without borders separating the rich from the poor is the Temple which Our Lady wants; this will be the real New World, the New Creation brought about by God's grace operating through the Mother of this hemisphere (as proclaimed by Pope John Paul II in *Ecclesia in America*): *la Virgen Morena de Guadalupe*.

Our Lady of Guadalupe and the entire Guadalupe event at Tepeyac is not a new truth, but a new way of imaging the truth, so that it may be a guiding light in the construction of a world based on justice and equality, freedom and responsibility, compassion and love.