

Latina Magnificat

Our Lady of Guadalupe and the call to justice

By JEANETTE RODRIGUEZ

The following is an edited version of a talk given at the conference “A Light to the Nations: Comprehensive Immigration Reform and the Church’s Global Commitment to the Poor,” sponsored by Celebration and held Jan. 12-14, 2011, in San Antonio, Texas.

The Magnificat, also known as the Cantic of Mary, is perhaps one of the most beautiful prayers in our Catholic tradition and is recited every day in evening prayer during the Liturgy of the Hours. Across cultures and across time, we have heard stories of Mary and her messages to the world. In all those messages, as in the Magnificat, she expresses her joy in the God who saves, and she is the medium to express God’s strength, wisdom, might, mercy and love.

Today I am here to speak to you of what the conference planners call the “Latina Magnificat,” that is, the message of Mary as manifested in the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. I will refer to her as Tonantzin Guadalupe. (Tonantzin is Nahuatl for “our mother.”) From Indian to Indian, from community to community, the word of what had happened to Juan Diego at Mount Tepeyac in 1531 began to be told along with the other marvels that took place in the presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The deeds rapidly entered into the traditions of the people. Only afterward was the narration written down, first in Nahuatl and later in Spanish.

As we unpack the *Nican Mophua* — the Nahuatl account of her appearance — we will see that her message is in fact an example of the bread of truth and the bread of justice.

Background and setting

The famous Mexican anthropologist Clodomiro L. Siller Acuña presents the narration and tradition of



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Guadalupe as that which incarnates the traditional values of the indigenous peoples. It is these values that become the “meat and the body and blood of the message.”¹ In order to understand and appreciate this message, one needs to know something about the Nahuatl culture.

In looking at the *Nican Mophua*, it is also important to understand that Nahuatl is a symbolic language. It has meaning far beyond words, much more profound, much richer and fuller. It is a simple language, direct, smooth, precise, elegant, resounding, beautiful, significant and even sublime. Another important aspect of the Nahuatl language is the use of *disfrasismos*, a way of communicating the most profound thought or feeling using a complementary union of two words or symbols that express one meaning. The phrase “flower and song” is an example of *difrasismo*. The Nahuatl believe that only through flower and song, only through *flor y canto*, can truth be grasped.

The *Nican Mophua* begins with a statement that sets the histori-

cal context of the appearance. It is imperative to recall the devastation that resulted in the clash between the 16th-century Spanish conquistadors and the indigenous communities they encountered. This clash of cultures, coupled with the Spaniards’ military superiority and their disdain for the indigenous people, led to the devastation of the Nahuatl and their culture. Those secular and religious individuals who objected were powerless to stop the systemic violence. In their enthusiasm to convert the natives, the clergy lost their humanity even as they pursued divinity.

The indigenous people were forced into a state of helplessness, powerlessness, fear, anger and eventually self-hatred. It is only through poetry and song that such devastation can begin to be expressed; the intellect falls silent, unable to make sense of it. The following excerpt is just one example of poems² that were written by post-conquest Aztecs as testaments to the reality of the conquered peoples:

Broken spears lie in the roads;
We have torn our hair in our grief
The houses are roofless now, and
their walls
Are red with blood.

Worms are swarming in the streets
and plazas,
And the walks are spattered with
gore
The water has turned red, as if it
were dyed
And when we drink it,
It has the taste of brine

We have pounded our hands in
despair
Against the adobe walls,
For our inheritance, our city, is
lost and dead
The shields of our warriors were
its defense.
But they could not save it.

The narrative

Tonantzin Guadalupe appears in the setting of the *postguerra*, 10 years after the conquest. She associates herself with *El verdadero Dios, por quien se vive* (the true God for whom one lives). This expression is one of the names that the Nahuatl gave to their gods. When Tonantzin Guadalupe states that she is from the one true God, the God who gives life, the Nahuatl recognize this God to be their God.

The text states the day, the date, and the time of the apparition: Saturday, December 9, 1531, early in the morning. For the indigenous, *muy de madrugada* (very early in the morning) referred not only to daybreak, but to the beginning of all time. Tonantzin Guadalupe appeared early in the morning, just as the day is coming out of darkness and night. This meaningful time defined the Guadalupe event as fundamental, equal in significance to the origin of the world and the cosmos.

According to the *Nican Mophua*, early that morning, Juan Diego, a Christian Indian of middle age, was walking to early Mass at Tlatelolco.³ Suddenly Juan heard very beautiful music. He believed that he was either dreaming or in paradise. (For the Nahuatl, music was one-half of their dual expression of truth, beauty, philosophy, and divinity: flower and song together — a *disfrasis* — manifested the presence of the Divine.)

He heard a soft voice saying, “Juanito, Juan Dieguito.” When he came to the top of a nearby hill, he saw a lady of glowing beauty. Her dress radiated like the sun and her face had an expression of love and compassion.

She then spoke to him and made known her will: “Know and understand, you the dearest of my children, that I am the ever holy Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God through whom one lives, Mother of the Creator of heaven and earth. I have a living desire that there be built a temple, so that in it I can show and give forth all my love, compassion, help, and defense, because I am your loving mother: to you, all who are



with you, to all the inhabitants of this land and to all who love me, call upon me, and trust in me. I will hear their lamentations and will remedy all their miseries, pains and sufferings.” She told him to go to the palace and bring her message to the bishop.

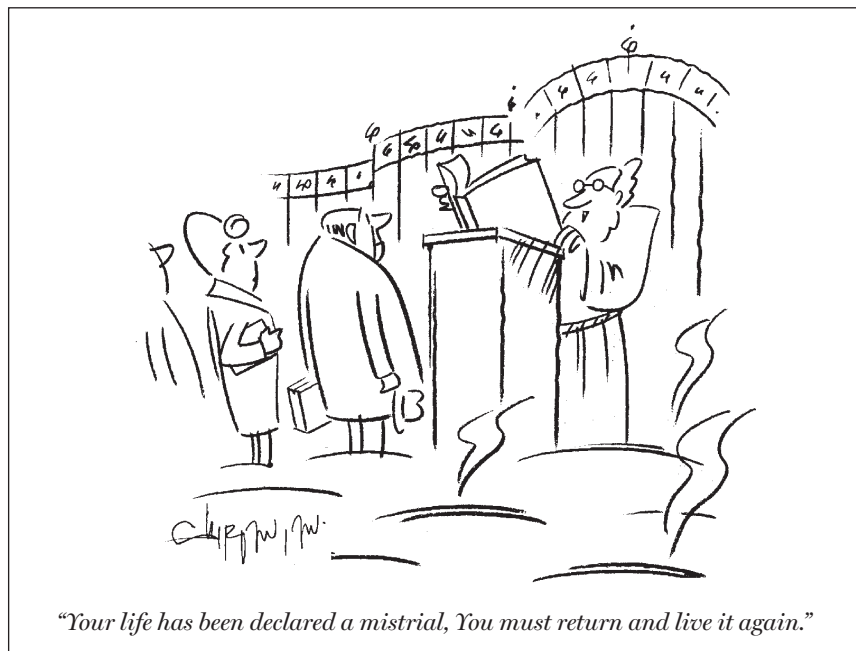
The bishop did not believe him, and the next day Juan Diego returned to the lady to tell her: “My dear Lady, I understood perfectly well in the way in which he responded that he believes that perhaps it is an invention of mine that you want them to build a temple here. This I beg you, entrust your mission to one of the important persons who is well known, respected, and esteemed so that they may believe him. You know that I am nobody, a nothing, a coward, a pile of old sticks, just like a bunch of leaves. I am nothing. You have sent me to walk in places where I do not belong.”

The lady answered him, “Listen, my son, the smallest of my children, I want you to understand that I have many servants and messengers to

whom I can entrust this message, but in every aspect it is precisely my desire that you seek help so that with your mediation, my wish will be fulfilled.”

When Juan Diego returned to the bishop the next day to repeat the message, the bishop said that he would need a sign. Then he had Juan Diego followed, but could discover nothing. The following day, as Juan Diego was on his way to find a priest for his dying uncle, the Virgin appeared to him again. She told him to go to the top of the hill, where he would find various flowers. He obeyed immediately, and when he arrived at the top, he was astounded to discover numerous exquisite roses of Castille, especially since it was long before their normal time. They had a beautiful aroma and were covered with the morning dew. He brought them to her, and she took them into her hands and rearranged them in his *tilma*, telling him to take them to the bishop: “You are my ambassador and most worthy of trust.”

Everyone knows the rest of the story. As he unfolded his *tilma*, all the roses dropped to the floor, and as they did, the precious image of the always Holy Virgin Mary, Mother of God, appeared on the *tilma* in the presence of the bishop and his



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household. The same *tilma* is in the temple built in her honor in Tepeyac, called Guadalupe.

In the symbols of nature

The image of Tonantzin Guadalupe on the *tilma* has defied time and scientists, and appears just as beautiful today as on December 12, 1531. It has standard visual elements that are recognized in religious art of the 16th century: golden sun rays, silver stars and celestial blue. The radiance of the colors very much has to do with the otherworldly: a perfection that exists on a different plane of reality as we know it. Yet like many religious icons, she has become an embodiment of people’s values and aspirations captured in time and space, and she continues to move in time and space. Touching the image of her replicas connects a person with the moment of the apparition, past and present.

Tonantzin Guadalupe’s clear connection to nature is seen both in her image and in the fiestas that celebrate her. She is surrounded by the sun, the stars, the moon and nature. In her fiestas, all children carry roses to her image, indicating that a proper celebration of a divine event must contain beautiful elements of nature. In the celebration of Guadalupe, sacred space and time are particularly important. There is a specific day, December 12, designated to celebrate the feast, and a specific time, dawn. The people rise at daybreak, the time of new beginnings and the rebirth of the sun, to sing “*Las Mananitas*” to her.

There is a popular saying in Mexico that “not everyone is Catholic but everyone is Guadalupana.” Tonantzin Guadalupe clearly represents a familial and relational component in Mexican-American life. She identifies herself as their mother, and they are all brothers and sisters to each other. Tonantzin Guadalupe takes a central role regarding the vital necessities of life: food, shelter, safety and concern for family. She is petitioned for everything from health to the protection of a family-owned business. Her image is found in many homes and businesses in the form of

pictures, statues and altars, and is worn on people’s bodies in the form of necklaces and even tattoos.

All of these examples are significant to the people and their religious life, but they are not institutionalized; that is, they are not formally structured with rigid rules and procedures. Rather, the touching, the processions, the intimate whispers and worn relics are manifestations of a deep intimacy guided by affect.

The image of Tonantzin Guadalupe in the churches must be accessible and within reach, so that devotees may touch it or rub their hands across the frame or touch the candle before the picture. It is not enough to recognize a symbol; it must be held, experienced and received. The symbols that emerge from the Guadalupe event are concrete: flowers, music, the sun. Not only does she come in her full presence adorned with cultural symbols that the people recognize, but she enters into their history. Through her affirmation and acceptance of her people, she gives them a reason to hope and to live.

Bread of life

In 2009, I celebrated the feast of Tonantzin Guadalupe in Mexico City. I was in a chapel reading a canticle that was written by Bishop Eduardo Pironio of Argentina, “To Our Lady of America.” I highlight a few of his verses:

Today we pray to you for Latin America
the continent that you visit
with your bare feet
yet offering the richness
of the Child you carry in your arms.
A poor child, who makes us rich,
An enslaved child, who sets us free.
Virgin of hope:
An awakened America.

We want to journey forth in hope.
Mother of the poor,
there is much misery among us.
Material bread is lacking
in many homes. ...

You know the poverty; you lived it.
Give us the soul of the poor in
order to be happy.

But alleviate the misery of the bodies
and tear out from the hearts of so many people
that selfishness that impoverishes.

While I was praying that canticle, a connection came to me: The narrative and the image of Tonantzin Guadalupe are so powerful that the experience of her is parallel to the base of nourishment that bread provides.

There is a certain order to bread. The baking of bread entails simple ingredients: water, flour, yeast, salt and maybe oil. Of all the ingredients, flour is the largest, the mass. Among the smallest is the yeast. These apparently disparate elements come together in a particular time and space, and something happens. Some will say, “It’s magical,” others, “It’s chemistry.” It also takes work. The yeast must be thoroughly kneaded into the mass. This is no minor process; it requires a good bit of muscle. Then, with the infiltration of heat, the bread begins to rise.

Amazingly, the smallest ingredient, yeast, is the only one with a capacity to help the other ingredients grow.

Tonantzin Guadalupe is seen as the one who brings the bread of life, Jesus, in her womb. She offers, in a very intimate way, comfort, love and peace, ingredients to nurture all of her children, and in particular the smallest among them.

ENDNOTES

1. Clodomiro L. Siller Acuña, “Guadalupe: Luz Y Cambio De Nuestra Realidad” (N.p: n.p., n.d).
2. These poems can also be found in Jeanette Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).
3. Portions of the *Nican Mophua* that appear here are taken from Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 31-36.

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