Latina Magnificat: Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Call to Justice
Dr. Jeanette Rodriguez
Seattle University

A Light to the Nations: Comprehensive Immigration Reform and the Church’s Global Commitment to the Poor
Celebration Publications: January 12-14, 2011; San Antonio, Texas.

Introduction

The Magnificat, also known as the Canticle 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. This song of Mary manifests not only Mary’s faith in her God, but a deep trust in that God. Every Catholic girl in some way or another has been exposed to the image of the Mary. Across cultures and across time we have heard stories of Mary and her messages to the world. In all those messages, she expresses her joy of the God that saves, and 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. Many of you have probably have seen this image of Mary, and I will refer to her as Tonantzín Guadalupe. Tonantzín is Nahuatl which means “our mother”.

The image of Tonantzín Guadalupe has standard visual elements that are recognized in religious art of the sixteenth century; golden sunrays, 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 plain of reality as we know it. Yet like many religious icons, she has become an embodiment of one’s values and aspirations captured in time and space and she continues to move in time and space. Touching the image of her replicas symbolically connects one with the moment of the apparition, past and present. The narrative image and devotion of Tonantzín Guadalupe is so powerful that the experience of her is parallel to the base of nourishment that bread provides.

This connection to bread came to me in Mexico City while celebrating the feast of Tonantzín Guadalupe in December 2009. I was in a chapel reading a Canticle that was written by Bishop Eduardo Pironio of Argentina entitled “To Our Lady of America,” in it he writes, and 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.

The bread of truth is lacking
In many minds
The bread of love is lacking
In many persons
The bread of the lord is lacking
in many peoples

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. … ”

Bread is yet another wonderful example of aesthetics. There is a certain order to it. While baking or cooking has been relegated to women, it is the one that feeds the family, who gives order to the family, that I am concentrating on. 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. There is only one that makes the rest grow: yeast. Smallness has nothing to do with the size of the potential change. 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 then be thoroughly mixed into the mass. This is no minor process. In bread baking, it is called kneading. It is intentional and requires a good bit of muscle. In any case, with the infiltration of heat, the bread begins to rise. There is a certain amount of skill involved in baking bread and something quite creative about it. Amazingly, the smallest ingredient, yeast, is the only one with a capacity to help the other ingredients grow.

Finally, bread is basic. Similarly the devotion to Tonantzin Guadalupe is basic to the Mexican-Catholic worldview. There is a popular saying in Mexico that states “not everyone is Catholic but everyone is Guadalupana.” Tonantzin Guadalupe appears as a mother and calls herself mother, she is the source of refuge, welcomes and is hospitable to those who have been marginalized. 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. The story goes beyond her being a basic ingredient of life or the spiritual life. Her image is Christianized. She is seen as the one who brings the bread of life, Jesus in her womb. As we unpack the story utilizing the work of Clodomiro L. Siller Acuña, the Mexican cultural anthropologist, we will see that her message is in fact an example of the bread of truth and the bread of justice. The message calls those in positions of political and ecclesiastical power to leave their palaces and move to the periphery and stand with the poor and the marginalized.

The Narrative and Image of Guadalupe as Tradition
The famous Mexican anthropologist, Clodomiro L. Siller Acuña, presents the narration and tradition of 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.” In order to understand and appreciate this message, one needs to know something about the Nahualt culture because the Guadalupe experience is a Nahualt event. It is an intimate encounter between human and the divine mingling blood and water referencing a Eucharistic symbol. This narrative transcends time, place and culture. It transcends because it is deeply human.

The original language of the Nican Mopohua is Nahualt. It is important to understand that Nahualt is a symbolic language which 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 Nahualt 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 which express one meaning. The phrase “flower and song” is an example of disfrasismo. The Nahualts believe that only through flower and song, only through flor y canto, can truth be grasped. Truth intuited through poetry derives from a particular kind of knowledge that is a consequence of being in touch with one’s inner experience as lived out communally. The seeker of this truth is mediated through the cultural constructs of the community as understood through the individual.

The Nican Mophua are the documents that mend the Guadalupe event. It begins with a statement that sets the historical context of the appearance. It is imperative to recall the devastation that resulted in the clash between the sixteenth 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-hated. 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 excerpts of poems were written by post conquest Aztecs as testaments to the reality of the conquered peoples.

**Broken Spears**

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 Fall of Tenochtitlan**

Our cries of grief rise up
And our tears rain down
for Tlatelolco is lost.
The Aztecs are fleeing across the lake
They are running away like women

How can we save our homes, my people
The Aztecs are deserting the city
The city is in flames and all
is darkness and destruction

Weep my people
Know that with these disasters
We have lost the Mexican nation
The water has turned bitter
Our food is bitter
These are the acts of the Giver of Life…

**Flowers and Songs of Sorrow**

We know it is true
That we must perish
For we are mortal men
You, the Giver of Life,
You have ordained it…

Have you grown weary of your servants
Are you angry with your servants
Oh Giver of Life?

Tonantzin Guadalupe appears in the setting of the “post guerra”, ten 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 recognized 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 appears 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.14

From Indian to Indian, from community to community, the word of what had happened to Juan Diego at Mount Tepeyac 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.15 Only afterward, according to the demands of the circumstances, was the narration written down, first in Nahuatl and later in Spanish.16

The Narrative

As Juan Diego is walking, he hears music. For the Nahuatl, music was one-half of their dual expression of truth, beauty, philosophy, and divinity: flower and song together (a disfrasismo) manifested the presence of the Divine.

Early in the morning of Saturday, December 9, 1531, Juan Diego, a Christian Indian of middle age, was walking to early Mass at Tlatelolco. Suddenly Juan heard very beautiful music. He believed that he was either dreaming or in paradise.17

He stopped, looked around, and tried to discover where the music was coming from. He heard a soft voice saying, “Juanito, Juan Dieguito.” Without even noticing what he was doing, he began walking up a nearby hillside towards the direction of the call.

When he came to the top of the 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 said to him, “Juanito, the smallest children, where are you going?” He responded, My dear child, I have to go to your house of Mexico, Tlatelolco, to hear about the divine things which are given and taught to us by our priests, the delegates of Our Lord.”

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.

“To bring about what my mercy intends, go to the palace of the bishop and tell him how I have sent you to manifest to him what I very much desire, that here on this site below the hill, a temple be built to me.” Immediately, he made an inclination, and said to her: “My lady, I am already on the way to fulfill your mandate.”

Juan Diego went quickly to the palace of the Spanish bishop. After a long wait, he was able to see the bishop and gave him the message of the Lady. The bishop was kind to him, but told him to return on another day when he could slowly hear his entire story from beginning to end. Juan Diego left in great sadness because he had failed in his mission.

He went directly on to the top of the hill where he had spoken with the lady, and seeing her, said: “My dear child, I went where you sent me to fulfill your mandate. It was with great difficulty that I entered the room of the bishop. I gave him your message, just as you had told me to do. He received my kindly and he heard me attentively, but he did not believe as true what I told him. He told me to come again and he would hear me out slowly. 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. Forgive me and please do not be angry with me, my lady and mistress.”

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. I beg you with great insistence, my son, the smallest of my children, and I sternly command you, once again, to go tomorrow to see the bishop. Greet him in my name and make known my will to him that he must begin work on the temple which I am asking for. And once again that I personally, the ever holy Virgin Mary, Mother of God, send you.”

Juan Diego responded: “My dear Lady, I will gladly go to fulfill your mandate. I will go to do your will. They probably will not listen to me, or if they listen, they will probably not believe me. But in any case, I will return tomorrow afternoon to report to you.”

The next day he went from his home to Tlatelolco to the palace of the bishop. Once again it was with great difficulty that he was able to gain an audience with the bishop. This time the bishop asked him many questions—where he saw her, what did she look like, etc.—but he answered the bishop perfectly. He explained with the greatest precision about her figure and everything which he had admired; nevertheless, the bishop did not believe him and told him that his word was not sufficient evidence, that he needed some sign to believe that it was truly the heavenly Lady who was sending him.

Without hesitation, Juan Diego responded: Tell me what is the sign that you are asking for, so that I may go and ask the Lady for it.”

The bishop, seeing that he was not disturbed in the slightest, and that it did not change his story in any way, dismissed him, but he immediately sent some of his household to follow him to see where he was going and with whom he was speaking. They started out after him. He went directly to the hill of Tepeyac but when he arrived, they lost track of him. They tried to find him, but they could not and returned to the bishop tired and angered. They begged the bishop not to believe him because he was obviously just inventing stories.

In the meantime, Juan Diego was already with the Virgin telling her the response of the bishop. Having heard the response, the Lady said to him, “Very well, my son, you will return here tomorrow so that you may take to the bishop the sign which he has asked for. With that, he will believe you and will have no further doubts; and know well, my beloved son, that I will repay you for your care, work and fatigue which you have done on my account. Go and I will await you here tomorrow.”

The next day, when Juan Diego was supposed to take the sign so that me might be believed, he did not return. When he had arrived home the previous day, he had discovered his uncle, Juan Bernadino, gravely ill. Juan Diego spent the day searching for a medical person to assist this uncle. Having failed to do so, he promised his uncle that early in the morning he would to Tlatelolco to call one of the priests to confess him and prepare him for death, because it was evident that it was time for Juan Bernardino to die and that he would not get up from his bed to regain his health.

Very early on the morning of Tuesday, December 12, 1531, Juan Diego rushed to Tlatelolco to get the priest. When he came near the hill of Tepeyac, he thought to himself that it was better not to stop because the Lady might see him and stop him. He did not want to displease her, but he did have to rush to get the priest for his dying uncle. As he was going by the other side of the hill, in order to avoid her, he saw the Lady coming down from the top of the hill, and coming to him, she said: What is happening, my son, the smallest of my children? Where are you going?

He became very embarrassed and greeting her, said, “My dear Lady, I hope you are happy; I am going to cause you some affliction. I want you to know that my uncle is ready to die. Now I am rushing to your house of Mexico to call one of the beloved priests of our Lord to go
and confess him and prepare him for death. As soon as I have taken care of this, I will return here so that I may take your message. Forgive me, I am not lying to you. I will come first thing tomorrow.”

The Virgin answered him: “Hear me, my son, that which scares you and causes you anguish is nothing; do not let your heart be troubled, do not be afraid of that sickness. Am I not who is your Mother? Your uncle will not die of this sickness; be assured that he is healthy.” Juan was greatly consoled and very happy. Then the Virgin told him to go to the top of the hill where he would find various flowers. She told him to cut and gather the flowers and bring them to her. 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 immediately cut them and returned to the Lady with the roses. She took them into her hands and rearranged them in his tilma. She then said, “My son, the smallest of my children, this diversity of roses is the proof and sign that you will take to the bishop. You will tell him in my name that he is to see my will in this and he must fulfill it. You are my ambassador and most worthy of trust. I rigorously command you to unfold your mantle only in the presence of the bishop and to show him what you have with you. You are to tell everything. You will say that I told you to go to the top of the hill to cut the flowers, and tell him everything that you saw and admired, so that you may convince the prelate to give his help in building a temple that I have asked for.”

Immediately after receiving his instructions for the Lady, he set out without haste to the house of the bishop. He was happy and had no doubt that this time he would be believed.

When he arrived at the palace of the bishop, the servants of the bishop came out to see him, but none of them wanted to listen to him. They acted as if he were not there. But seeing that he would not go away, that he simply stayed patiently in his place, the servants decided that they had better inform the bishop. Soon the strong aroma of the roses began to spread and the servants were able to get a few glimpses of what he had with him. They were surprised to see roses of various kinds and of great beauty, and at first tried to take them from him, but he held on all the more. They finally went to tell the bishop what they had seen and that it would be good to see the Indian.

The bishop became very excited, for he sensed that this was the sign that he had been asking for. He immediately asked for Juan Diego to be shown into his study. As soon Juan Diego came in, he made his reverence to the bishop and began to tell him once again everything that he had seen and admired and also the message of the Lady. He said: “Sir, I did what you ordered me to do, to go and tell my Lady, the Lady of Heaven, Holy Mary, precious Mother of God, that you asked for a sign in order to believe me, that you are to build a temple on the site that she is asking for. Furthermore, I told her that I had given you my word that I would bring you a sign and proof of her will. She accepted your request and kindly produced what you asked for, a sign and proof so that her will may be fulfilled.

“Today, very early in the morning, she once again ordered me to come and see you. I asked her for the sign so that you might believe me, as she had told me that she would do. And at that moment she produced the sign. She sent me to the top of the hill, where I had to seen her before, to cut the roses of Castille. After I had cut them, I came back down to the bottom of the hill where she took them into her hands, rearranged them, and put them into my mantle so that I might personally bring them to you.

“Even though I was well aware that the top of the hill was no place for flowers, because there are only cactus, mesquites, and other kind of wild brush, I did not doubt. When I went to the top of the hill, I saw that I was in paradise with all the varieties of roses of Castille, shining with the morning dew. She told me why I was to give them to you. That is what I am doing now so that in them you may see the sign which you have asked for and thus you will fulfill her will; also that the trustfulness of my word may be evident. Here they are; accept them.”
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, his household, the image, which has defied time and scientists, and appears just as beautiful today as on December 12, 1531. The same tilma is in the temple built in her honor in Tepeyac, called Guadalupe. As she appeared in their presence on the tilma, they were amazed and fell to their knees. They greatly admired the image and showed by their actions that they truly saw her in their minds an in their hearts.

The Image of Tonantzin Guadalupe

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.19

For those who participate in the realm of popular religiosity, religious experience permeates all space and time, with special strength and power that are part of the religious experience. Some examples of these phenomena are home altars, shrines, processions, and grave sites. 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. The nation of the sacred being immersed in history is seen as 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.20

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, intimate whispers, and worn relics are manifestations of a deep intimacy guided by affect.

As seen in the practices of popular devotion, presence and immediate contact are vital in the world of symbols. 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.21

BIBLIOGRAPHY


3 Ibid., 92.
4 Ibid., 93
11 Ibid., 12.
14 Ibid.
16 Cultural anthropologist Clodomiro L. Siller Acuña states that most “serious students of the Nican Mopohua accept the fact that the original author was Don Antonio Valeriano, an indigenous student and later teacher of the Colegio de la Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco.” The tradition tells us that he was an informant of the First Bishop of Mexico and that the document was written under the direction of Former Bernardino de Sahagun. While Siller Acuña recognizes the significant contributions that Don Antonio Valeriano made in the transcriptions of the Nican Mopohua, however, he also finds it hard to believe that he is the only author of the Nican Mopohua and makes a compelling argument that the writing of the Nican Mopohua was a result of a collegial and collective contribution.