

Our Lady of Guadalupe

Our Lady of Guadalupe, in Roman Catholicism, the Virgin Mary in her appearance before St. Juan Diego in four visions in 1531. The name also refers to the Marian apparition itself. Our Lady of Guadalupe holds a special place in the religious life of Mexico and is one of the most popular religious devotions. Her image, of a woman of mixed Indigenous and European features (mestiza) wearing a turquoise-colored mantle surrounded by a

Virgin of Guadalupe (Spanish: *Virgen de Guadalupe*), oil on canvas by Antonio de Torres, c. 1720; in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California. sunburst, has played an important role as a national symbol of Mexico.

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Appearances to St. Juan Diego

According to tradition, Mary appeared to Juan Diego, who was an Aztec convert to Christianity, on four occasions between December 9 and December 12, 1531. During her first apparition she requested that a shrine to her be built on the spot where she appeared, Tepeyac Hill (now in a suburb of Mexico City). However, the local bishop hesitated to act on this request. Mary appeared to Juan Diego a second time on December 9 after his meeting that day with the bishop and told him to return and try again.

On December 10 Juan Diego met with the bishop, who this time demanded a sign before he would approve construction of a church. Mary then appeared a third time to Juan Diego, who told her of the bishop's demand for a sign.

On December 12, she made her fourth appearance, ordering Juan Diego to collect roses from the hill and bring them to the bishop. Miraculously, there were roses blooming on the hill, despite it being winter. Moreover, the roses were native to Castile, a region in Spain that was the homeland of the bishop.



Our Lady of Guadalupe appearing to Juan Diego

Engraving depicting Our Lady of Guadalupe appearing to Juan Diego and the image of her becoming imprinted on his cloak (*tilma*); from the book *Felicidad de México en el principio, y milagroso origen, que tubo el Santuario de la Virgen María N. Señora de Gvadalupe, extramuros: en la aparición admirable de esta soberana Señora, y de su prodigiosa imagen* (1675) by Luis Becerra Tanco.

In his audience with the bishop on that day, Juan Diego opened his *tilma* (cloak), letting dozens of roses fall to the floor and revealing the image of Mary imprinted on the inside of the cloak—the image that is now venerated in the Basilica of Guadalupe. Mary is also said to have appeared to Juan Diego’s dying uncle, Juan Bernardino, and restored him to health.

Opposing views on the apparition’s authenticity

The traditional view has been questioned by various scholars and ecclesiastics, including the former abbot of the Basilica of Guadalupe. The primary objection is that there is no documentary evidence for the apparition until 1648; critics claim that

documents purporting to be from the 16th century are actually from the 17th. Critics have also noted that the bishop approached by Juan Diego was not consecrated until 1534, and he makes no mention of Juan Diego or of Our Lady of Guadalupe in his writings. Defenders of the Virgin of Guadalupe—including Pope John Paul II, who canonized Juan Diego and declared Our Lady of Guadalupe the patroness of the Americas—accept the authenticity of the early documents and point also to various oral accounts of the apparition.

Shrine and devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe

John Paul II’s actions were only the latest in a series of developments affirming the importance of Our Lady of Guadalupe. A shrine to the Virgin has existed on the site since at least 1556, when the archbishop of New Spain promoted devotion to the image of Mary at a chapel in Tepeyac. The image was described by an English prisoner in Mexico City in 1568, and by the end of the 16th century Our Lady of Guadalupe formed part of a wide network of



The Old Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe

Constructed on the site of an earlier 16th-century church, the Old Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City was finished in 1709.

shrines to the Virgin throughout Mexico. The story of Mary's appearance to Juan Diego was codified in the work of Miquel Sánchez in 1648, and an account in the Indigenous language (Nahuatl) was published in 1649 and widely accepted as accurate. The devotion continued to grow, especially after Our Lady of Guadalupe was credited with ending a deadly epidemic of hemorrhagic fever that ravaged Mexico City in 1736–37.

Patronage of Our Lady of Guadalupe

In 1737 Our Lady of Guadalupe was proclaimed patroness of Mexico City, and in 1746 her patronage was accepted by all the territories of New Spain, which included part of present-day California as well as Mexico and regions as far south as Guatemala and El Salvador. In 1754 Pope Benedict XIV approved her patronage and granted her a proper feast and mass for December 12. Pope Pius X proclaimed her patroness of Latin America in 1910, and in 1935 Pius XI approved her patronage over the Philippines. Veneration of Our Lady of Guadalupe has been particularly strong among women, especially in Mexico, and since at least the early 18th century the devotion was spread throughout the world by the Jesuits and other religious.

Role in Mexican history

Our Lady of Guadalupe's role in Mexican history is not limited to religious matters; she has played an important role in Mexican nationalism and identity. In 1810 Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla promoted her as the patroness of the revolt he led against the Spanish. The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared on the rebels' banners, and the rebels' battle cry was "Long Live Our Lady of Guadalupe." During a religious revival in Mexico in the late 19th century, preachers declared that the foundation of Mexico could be dated to the time of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe, because she freed the people from idolatry and reconciled the Spanish and Indigenous peoples in a

common devotion. Emiliano Zapata's peasant rebels carried the banner of Our Lady when they entered Mexico City in 1914, and, during the civil war in Mexico in 1926–29, the banners of the rebels bore her image.

Symbolism

Our Lady of Guadalupe's continuing significance as a religious and national symbol is attested by the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who visit her shrine in Mexico City every year. Additionally, the image of her that appears on St. Juan Diego's *tilma* has been interpreted by some scholars as containing elements that hold particular meaning to Mexican and Indigenous people. Notably, these elements combine European Roman Catholic symbolism with imagery from the Aztec religion.

- **Face:** Our Lady of Guadalupe's skin color and features are those of a mestiza, a woman of mixed Indigenous and European heritage, because she represents the unity of both peoples. Her eyes are downcast, signifying her virtuous humility.
- **Mantle:** Mary's mantle, or *rebozo*, is turquoise-colored (i.e., blue-green) instead of the bright blue of many European Madonnas. In Aztec tradition, turquoise was a color reserved for royalty in Aztec tradition, thus signifying Mary's queenly status. The stars on her mantle are said to represent heaven. The rose color of her tunic, which she wears beneath her mantle, signifies the dawn of a new era.
- **Sunburst:** The sunburst behind Mary is believed to represent the Aztec sun god Huitzilopochtli. The Virgin appears to be emerging from the Sun but does not extinguish its rays, signifying that she is greater than the Sun or any Indigenous sun gods.
- **Moon:** The Virgin stands on a crescent moon, which some scholars believe represents the Aztec moon god. The moon is also a Christian symbol of Mary's perpetual virginity.
- **Angel:** Below the moon is an angel, which is said to represent a new age. Notably, the angel's wings are that of an eagle, which was the *nagual*, or "animal disguise," of Huitzilopochtli. Mary's position to him has been likened to that of royalty being raised up on the shoulders of a supporting figure, signifying Mary's precedence over the Aztec gods. The eagle's wings are red, green, and white, the official colors of Mexico and those of the Mexican flag.

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