News

Pilgrims carry a statue and image of Our Lady of Guadalupe near the basilica in her name in M

Pilgrims carry a statue and image of Our Lady of Guadalupe near the basilica in her name in Mexico City Dec. 12, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The basilica was closed that day to avoid crowds during Our Lady of Guadalupe feast day celebrations. (CNS/Reuters/Gustavo Graf)



by David Agren

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Mexico City — January 29, 2021

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On the Dec. 12 feast day for Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador tweeted photos of the national patroness's namesake basilica — a site normally teeming with millions of pilgrims, but ordered closed by church and civic officials.

The Archdiocese of Mexico City urged pilgrims to stay away and celebrate "virtually" or at their local parish. The government, meanwhile, deployed the National Guard (a militarized police force) to ensure the stragglers arriving didn't come to the gates.

Still, the president took the empty scene as an opportunity to commend the population — as he has throughout the pandemic — tweeting (in Spanish): "There's no better demonstration of the Mexican people's responsibility in the pandemic than this image of the Basilica on the day dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe."

Tweet from @lopezobrador_, account of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, on Dec. 12, 2020

The president then said of Guadalupe: "Among all symbols, Mexicans situate in first place the veneration of the Virgin and in second, respect for [Benito] Juárez," the revered late former president and promotor of Mexico's secular state.

The tweet caused a clamor — like most presidential pronouncements in Mexico — for its contrasts and contradictions. And the commendation — from a man who refuses to wear a mask and announced he had tested positive for COVID-19 Jan. 24 after taking a commercial flight — clashed with scenes of crowded streets and shopping centers.

The president, commonly called "AMLO," also combined two powerful, yet unlikely symbols.

Mexican politicians used to avoid references to Guadalupe, whose basilica is the among the world's most visited Marian shrine. They also paid fealty to the cult of Juárez — a former seminarian who rose from the poverty of an indigenous village in 19th century Oaxaca to the presidency and wrote the reform laws that stripped the church of its property and privileges.

But the tweet once again showed AMLO's ongoing attempts at associating himself with the patroness' widespread popularity, incorruptible image and importance as a protector for a population often left on its own in times of crisis by their public officials — including the president himself.

Politicians in recent years have tried to tap Guadalupe's popularity — with local officials sponsoring pilgrimages and presidents paying lip service to the patroness' outsized place in Mexico's religious life and cultural and national identity.

A pilgrim prays outside the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe during the annual pilgrimage in

A pilgrim prays outside the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe during the annual pilgrimage in her honor in Mexico City Dec. 11, 2019. (CNS/Reuters/Carlos Jasso)

None, however, have linked their political identities to Guadalupe quite like AMLO. He christened his political party "MORENA" — an acronym for National Regeneration Movement that spells the Spanish word for a dark-skinned woman.

"*La Virgen Morena*" is also a popular name for Guadalupe. AMLO has coupled that with a quasi-religious values discourse, a tendency to see the world in terms of "right or wrong" and promises to "re-moralize" public life.

"Since Juárez, no one has combined a civil discourse with a religious discourse as a public discourse in the presidency," said Ilán Semo, a historian at the Jesuit-run Iberoamerican University in Mexico City.

"This hasn't happened since the times of Nueva España," when Mexico was still a Spanish colony, Semo continued. And with the president's frequent proselytizing and embrace of Guadalupe: "It's as if [the president] were simultaneously this sort of religious and political emblem."

The Dec. 12 tweet's treatment of Guadalupe was vintage AMLO: a willingness to go against the grain of previous political custom, combining religious and civic customs in a country where secularism was once a political ethos.

Even though the figures of Guadalupe and Juárez seemingly clash, López Obrador has skillfully leveraged a bevy of images from Mexico's history — many contradictory with each other — in an attempt to legitimize a government he promotes as transformational.

"López Obrador not only embodies or uses Our Lady of Guadalupe," said Fernando Dworak, a columnist and political analyst in Mexico City. "He speaks with this notion of 'the people,' and the amalgamation of symbols and a discourse of morals gives him moral credibility for his followers."

Rather than simply attending public ceremonies on the anniversaries of public heroes' births and deaths as his predecessors dutifully did, AMLO attempts to "incarnate" those figures — often successfully, according to Dworak.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador displays images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador displays images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at a March 18, 2020, news conference in Mexico City. (CNS screen grab/milenio.com)

Dworak points to AMLO's solid approval rating of roughly 60% and his ability to build an unwavering base through years of spreading a moral discourse, leading an

austere lifestyle and having inept opponents unable to counter his messaging — even if AMLO's grasp on the facts is flimsy and a common response to unfavorable information is to quip, "I have other data."

Opponents have taken up religious imagery, too — such as a right-wing movement known as FRENAA, which has marched with Guadalupe banners, but also adopted images such as Our Lady of Fatima (which is popular on the right) and shouts of "*¡Viva Cristo Rey!*" from the Cristero Rebellion of the 1920s.

But unlike AMLO's opponents and even other religious leaders, Dworak said, "the president is the person who controls the moral discourse."

"He knows how to handle symbols," Dworak said. "López Obrador is a person who has bathed his government with symbols."

The logo for AMLO's administration prominently features five luminaries from Mexico's past.

It doesn't use images of Guadalupe. But naming his party MORENA and registering his presidential candidacy on her feast day in 2017 left little doubt of his attempts at leveraging her appeal. Many in MORENA haven't pushed back on the president's conservatism and religious discourse, even as they identify as left-leaning.

"People on the left now with AMLO were the biggest critics when [former President Vicente] Fox used Guadalupe's banner for political purposes," said Bárbara González, a political analyst in Monterrey.

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AMLO isn't the first politician to pull the patroness into politics. Promotors of independence and the Mexican Revolution marched with images of Guadalupe, who Catholics believe appeared to St. Juan Diego at Tepeyac Hill in 1531 in what is now northern Mexico City.

Fox scandalized the chattering classes and old political elite by visiting the basilica and praying to Guadalupe on the morning of his inauguration. His successor, President Felipe Calderón, proclaimed, "We're all *guadalupanos*, independent of faith, of beliefs, of non-beliefs." Politicians from all sides of the aisle have attended

celebrations at the basilica during papal visits to Mexico — with some even kissing the papal ring.

The public embrace of Guadalupe from the political class has coincided with a thaw in church-state relations. Mexico and the Vatican established relations in 1992 after decades of estrangement and anti-clerical laws so strict that priests and religious couldn't wear their habits in public.

The Catholic-friendly National Action Party (PAN) won consecutive governments under Fox and Calderón, but their attempts at using religion were ephemeral.

"The main problem with religious language is you need to stick with it," said Rodolfo Soriano-Núñez, a sociologist who studies Mexican Catholicism. Additionally**,** he said, "you need to play the part."

AMLO has played the part, positioning himself as austere, incorruptible and anti-establishment in a system awash with scandals and inexplicable fortunes. "You can't have a rich government with a poor population," he quips often.

A group of people pray near the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City Dec. 11, 202

A group of people pray near the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City Dec. 11, 2020. The basilica temporarily closed to avoid crowds on the Dec. 12 Guadalupe feast day during the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Carlos Jasso)

The president preaches often in his daily press conferences, which can last more than three hours. He draws from the Beatitudes and other passages of Scripture and sometimes Pope Francis — though AMLO tends of overlook vast swaths of Francis' vision, such as the pope's persistent calls for better protection of the environment.

His values tilt conservative and he identifies as "Christian" rather than Catholic or Protestant — though he deftly appeals to both groups.

"It's a very conservative use of religion. It's not Liberation Theology," said Semo, the historian. "We're not talking about the Catholic left of the Protestant left, which is that the people, the poor, are emancipated on their own. He goes for a more conservative discourse of 'I will save them.' "

AMLO has promised to publish a moral constitution and reprinted a booklet of values and citizenship from the 1940s known as "*La Cartilla Moral*." Evangelical churches have promised to distribute the booklet; the Mexican bishops' conference, meanwhile, has demurred.

Mexicans generally "dislike priests and pastors talking politics," Semo said. But AMLO has shown the opposite seems to be acceptable, he said.

For their part, church officials seem sanguine about AMLO's use of Guadalupe and his religious discourse.

"[AMLO] mentions these kinds of things, depending on the circumstances," said Fr. Hugo Valdemar, former spokesman for the Archdiocese of Mexico City. "He doesn't just do for the sake of doing it, and he isn't trying to usurp the role of the church."

[David Agren is a freelance journalist in Mexico City.]