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A pilgrimage to Mexico to honor Our Lady of Guadalupe

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

This week, I'm in Mexico, spending time each day at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, trying to enter her story and presence and begging for the grace of peace and wisdom. My friend Jim Reale proposed this retreat. He has just finished two years of daily two-hour meditation every morning in front of her famous image. He wanted to conclude this part of his spiritual journey with a pilgrimage to her and invited me along.

We took as our text one of the best books ever on the mythic story, *Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation* by Virgilio Elizondo (Orbis Books, 1997). The first part features a current translation of an ancient story, the *Nican Mopohua*, written for the Nahuatl people, followed by 100 pages of Elizondo's insightful commentary on the document.

Everyone knows the story. Juan Diego, one of the poorest of the poorest indigenous people, is walking on Mount Tepeyac, a desert hill on the outskirts of Mexico City, in 1531. It's the age of Hernán Cortés and the Spanish Catholic conquerors who committed genocide against the indigenous people. A new convert, 57-year-old Juan Diego is on his way to morning Mass 15 miles away when he hears a large gathering of birds singing loudly on Tepeyac. He climbs higher to investigate this extraordinary sound when he encounters an indigenous woman, beautifully dressed, shining like the sun, infinitely compassionate -- Our Lady of Guadalupe.

She asks him to go to the bishop and tell him she wants a church built there. He agrees but reminds her he is poor and marginalized. With tender loving kindness toward Juan Diego, she insists. When he finally gets in to see the bishop, the bishop demands a sign. Around the same time, she heals Juan's dying uncle. When Juan Diego returns to tell her the bishop's demand, she tells him to go to the top of the hill to pick from the flowers there and gather them in his cloak. He discovers hundreds of the most beautiful flowers

in the world blossoming on that rough desert hill. She rearranges them and tells Juan Diego to give them to the bishop. That will be a sign for him, she says. When he arrives at the bishop's house and opens his cloak, they transform into the miraculous image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Soon a chapel is built, thousands are attracted to the image, and hundreds of thousands are converted to Christianity.

"I do not know of any other event since Pentecost that has had such a revolutionary, profound, lasting, far-reaching, healing and liberating impact on Christianity," Elizondo writes. "Today, I see her as the beginning of a new creation, the mother of a new humanity -- a figure offering unlimited possibilities for creative and liberating reflection. Juan Diego is the prototype of the new human being of the Americas. ... Our Lady of Guadalupe is not a dogma of Christian faith, but she is definitely among the most tender, beautiful, vibrant, and influential truths of the Christianity of the Americas."

The *Nican Mopohua*, the ancient indigenous account of the apparition, makes the story come alive with its touching details. For example, Mary calls him from the start: "Dignified Juan, dignified Juan!" He feels "very good, very happy" in her presence, we are told.

"Listen, my most abandoned son, dignified Juan. Where are you going?" she asks.

When she requests that a church be built, she explains: "In it, I will show and give to all people all my love, my compassion, my help and my protection, because I am your merciful mother and the mother of all the nations that live on this earth who would love me, who would speak with me, who would search for me, and who would place their confidence in me. There I will hear their laments and sufferings and remedy and cure all their miseries, misfortunes, and sorrows."

When poor Juan suggests she find a more notable person to approach the feared bishop, he reasons: "In reality, I am one of those *campesinos*, a piece of rope, a small ladder, the excrement of the people ... They order me around, lead me by force ... And you would send me to a place where I do not belong!"

"Listen and hear well in your heart, my most abandoned son," Mary responds with infinite compassion. "That which scares you and troubles you is nothing. Do not let your face and heart be troubled. Do not fear any illness, anxiety or pain. Am I not here, who am your mother? Are you not under my shadow and my protection? Am I not your source of life? Are you not in the folds of my mantle? In the cradle of my arms? Is there anything else you need?"

When Juan Diego brought his cloak full of flowers to the bishop, he explained that the hill had become "the Flowering Earth!" At the sight of the image, the bishop and everyone else is converted. Since then, hundreds of millions of Latin Americans have been comforted by this story and image.

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Elizondo takes us through the Catholic-run genocide of the native peoples, their devout spirituality rooted in the beauty of creation, especially birds and flowers, and the apparition's shocking politics: how she takes sides with the poor, marginalized indigenous people, and therefore, against the murderous white Catholic conquerors.

"The call of Juan Diego is a divine protest against the elitist policies of a church that refuses to recognize the giftedness of the poor and lowly, especially the non-Western ones," Elizondo writes. "Tepeyac is the site of several important contrasts: between the feminine aspect of God revered by the Indians and the European God as male; between being at home and being a foreigner and stranger in one's own land;

between an enjoyable evangelization and a forced and painful one; between evangelization as dialogue and evangelization as didactic teaching; between the native priestliness of the people and an ordained foreign clergy; between personal transformation through God's grace and human victimization and sacrifices (of Indians, Spaniards, or anyone else)."

We entered the modern church and immediately saw the sacred image of Guadalupe high above the altar. The church hall was packed with at least 10,000 poorly dressed Mexicans deep in prayer, in total devotion to our Lady. It was so moving and inspiring. Many hundreds of them brought flowers to leave on the altar. Outside, we saw dozens making their way across the stone plaza on their knees. It seemed that every hour, another 20,000 pilgrims arrived. More than 20 million visit the basilica each year.

One story below and behind the altar is a conveyor belt that passes underneath the image of Guadalupe. With the thousands of other pilgrims, we looked up at the image, saw its details and felt its warm welcome. Very touching and inspiring.

Of course, Mexico suffers from terrible poverty; a U.S.-backed drug war that's killed tens of thousands of people in recent years; unparalleled government and police corruption; and ongoing destruction of the environment. (Thinking of gun violence, I remember a recent statistic I heard on NPR that said compared to the U.S., Mexico has only one gun store -- in the whole country.) At the heart of all this systemic injustice is the urgent need for the demilitarization of our border and a more just U.S. immigration policy, including passage of the DREAM Act for immigrant youth. These grave concerns overwhelm me, and I brought them all with me on my pilgrimage to our Lady.

Each day, we returned to the basilica and the miraculous image. Like thousands of others, we sat in prayer, meditating on the sacred image high above the altar. Later, we walked the hill, visited the other churches of the apparition, sat in the gardens, and shared our feelings and hopes.

Most of my spiritual life has been focused not on Mary or God as Father or even the Holy Spirit, but on Jesus. Fifteen years ago, I made a similar pilgrimage to Lourdes, which surprised me and touched me deeply. Ten years ago, I wrote a little book, *Mary of Nazareth, Prophet of Peace*, to come to know her better. There, I reflected on the three spiritual movements of her life, from the Annunciation as contemplative nonviolence to the Visitation as active nonviolence to the Magnificat as prophetic nonviolence.

Here in Mexico, I come as a beggar, identifying with Juan Diego, bringing her, as she requested, all my "laments, sufferings, miseries, misfortunes and sorrows" and those of the church and the world in search of her comfort, compassion and healing peace. I am well aware that I'm a privileged white *gringo*, but nevertheless, I come as a poor pilgrim in all my brokenness, misfortune and sorrow. This is what I presented to her. Guadalupe clearly offers herself first and foremost to those who are broken and in need. With the tens of thousands of Mexicans and Latinos around me, I felt welcomed, comforted and blessed, ready to go forward on the journey of peace.

"For me, Guadalupe continues to invite us to a deeper relationship and is more intimate with each encounter," Jim told me. "When you encounter her, you experience peace. She is the experience of peace. She is utterly accepting of us and totally nonjudgmental. You can bring anything to her. She is the ultimate confessor, the ultimate forgiver ... The key for me is not so much Marian theology and/or the historical significance, but the experience of Mary herself. This is what she wants to share; this is what she offers us."

Together, we pray: Lady of Guadalupe, thank you for coming to Latin America and all of the Americas with your loving kindness and boundless compassion. Thank you for inviting us to bring our pain, sufferings, laments, miseries, brokenness and sorrows to you. Hear our prayers, heal our brokenness, and bless our struggles for peace. Help us abolish war, poverty, greed, violence, selfishness, sexism, racism, environmental destruction and nuclear weapons, that we might welcome your son's reign of nonviolence, peace and justice. Most of all, lead us to the God of peace so that like Juan Diego, we might fulfill our vocations to be God's beloved sons and daughters, peacemakers to a broken world. Amen. ¡Gracias a Dios!

John Dear will lead a retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker," April 5-7 in East Stroudsburg, Pa. To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For*. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings, Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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