

St. Francis de Sales December Reflections

Saint Juan Diego Feast Day Dec 11



Although we have discussed the Miracle of Guadalupe previously, we were focused, correctly in the Theological sense, on the role of the Mother of God. St. Juan Diego's parts in the event are sometimes lost in the dramas of the image appearing on the cloak, the flowers blooming in the cold December weather, the conversion of the skeptical Bishop, and the preservation of the garment and the image for almost 500 years. After a brief review of the details of the apparition we will reflect on why God, or in this case His Mother, frequently picks for special tasks people the world would dismiss as 'nobodies'.

Saint Juan Diego was born in Mexico in 1474. He became the first Roman Catholic saint indigenous to the Americas. When a group of Franciscan missionaries arrived in Mexico in 1524, he and his wife, Maria Lucia, converted to Catholicism and were among the first in the region to be baptized. Juan Diego was very committed to his new Christian life and would walk long distances to receive religious instruction at the nearby Franciscan mission station.

On December 9, 1531, Juan Diego was hurrying to attend Mass in celebration of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. However, he was stopped by the beautiful sight of a radiant woman who introduced herself, in his native tongue, as the "ever-perfect Holy Mary, who has the honor to be the mother of the true God." Mary told Juan Diego she was the mother of all those who lived in this land and asked him to make a request to the local bishop to build a chapel in her honor there on Tepeyac Hill, which was the site of a former Aztec temple. When Juan Diego approached Bishop Juan de Zumarraga telling his story, but the Bishop was doubtful and asked for time to think. Later, the same day, Juan Diego encountered Mary and again told her he had failed in getting the bishop to grant her request. He tried to explain to her he was not an important person, and therefore not the one for the task, but she insisted he was the man she wanted.

Juan Diego returned to the Bishop the next day and repeated his request, but now the Bishop asked for proof or a sign the apparition was real and truly of heaven. Juan Diego once again met the Virgin Mary. After explaining to her what the Bishop asked, she agreed and told him she'd provide him with proof on the next day, December 11. However, on the next day, Juan Diego's uncle became very sick and he set out to find a priest for his uncle. He was determined to get there quickly and didn't want to face the Virgin Mary with shame for missing their meeting.

But Mary intercepted him and asked what was wrong. He explained his situation and promised to return after he found his uncle a priest. She looked at him and asked "No estoy yo aqui que soy tu madre?" (Am I not here, I

who am your mother?) She promised him his uncle would be cured and asked him to climb to the hill and collect the flowers growing there. He obeyed and was amazed to find many flowers blooming (unheard of for the cold month of December) on the rocky land. He filled his tilma (cloak) with flowers and returned to Mary who arranged the flowers within his cloak and told him this would be the sign he is to present to the bishop. Once Juan Diego found the bishop, he opened his cloak and the bishop was presented with a miraculous imprinted image of the Virgin Mary on the flower-filled cloak, which we now recognize as being that of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The next day Juan Diego found his uncle fully recovered. Juan Diego's imprinted cloak has remained perfectly preserved from 1531 to the present time. The Basilica of Guadalupe on Tepeyac Hill has become one of the world's most-visited Catholic shrines.

Juan Diego, his mission accomplished, spent the rest of his life in quiet solitude, and moved into a little house on Tepeyac Hill, and lived a life of prayer and work. He remained there until his death on December 9, 1548, 17 years after the first apparition. He was beatified on May 6, 1990 by Pope John Paul II and canonized on July 31, 2002.

His role in the events of Guadalupe is somewhat overshadowed by the events themselves, but why was such a person chosen for this task? Most of the kings, emperors, and even the Popes who lived in those years have been forgotten by all but a handful of historical scholars. King Henry VIII of England is an exception, but the majority of us, I think, would rather be forgotten than to be remembered for doing most of the things he did. Virtue, indeed, is its own reward, as it appears the world has little use for virtue itself.

Repeatedly, in the recorded annals of Judeo-Christian history, God seems to pluck some very unlikely people to do some of His most important works. For example: Jesus of Nazareth- a penniless wandering carpenter, Abraham- a nomad, Moses- a runaway murderer, David- a poor shepherd boy, Queen Esther- who saved her people, all of the Twelve Apostles except Matthew- who was a tax collector which is hardly a recommendation, St. Mary Magdalene- reportedly of questionable virtue, St Francis of Assisi- a failed crusader, and St Joan of Arc- who rose from obscurity to lead an army, to name a few. In the eyes of the world none of these people had much going for them. They were, at least initially, unimportant, and could easily be ignored and brushed aside.

Yet they all contributed hugely to the founding and later success of the Jewish and then the Christian religions. God did not choose them for their erudition, their vast talents, or perhaps even their piety. He chose them for His own purposes which they fulfilled in their own ways to the best of their abilities. The world may still not think much of them, but in God's eyes, and in those of us who are believers, they epitomize the meaning of the phrase, 'with God all things are possible'.

Like Juan Diego, Our Lady picked from obscurity St. Bernadette of Lourdes and the three children of Fatima to announce Her presence in and Her love and concern for our world. She has Her own reasons for picking out such unknowns, but, regardless of our opinions, they all got their jobs done despite worldly skepticism and opposition. They are all recognized as saints by the Church. Not bad for a bunch of nobodies. It's a good feeling to know that God can pluck any of us out of nowhere and set us on the road to achieving His purposes great and small. That is perhaps one of the meanings to emerge from the apparitions of Mary. For me it is certainly one of the hopes that is born at Christmas and fulfilled at Easter.

By the way the names of the three children were Lucia dos Santos and her cousins Francisco and Jacinta Marto.

Respectfully submitted,
Jerry Devine
Chair Emeritus Liturgy

