

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe

SANTO DEL DÍA

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Devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe arises from the apparitions of 1531 to the Indian Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, a tangible sign of which remains in the miraculous image of the Blessed Virgin, subjected to various scientific analyses and still preserved at the shrine dedicated to her.

December 12, the day in which the figure of the *Virgen Morenita* materialized instantly on the tilma (an indigenous garment used as a cloak) of San Juan Diego, is a feast of

obligation in Mexico because that event is at the heart of the formation of Mexican identity. It was in fact also the engine of evangelization of an entire continent, the reason why Our Lady of Guadalupe is patroness of all America and the basilica on the Tepeyac hill is a pilgrimage destination every year for millions of Christians.

Regarding the origin of the name, it was the Virgin who asked to be venerated as "Saint Mary of Guadalupe" in appearing to Juan Bernardino (Juan Diego's uncle, healed of his illness). In this detail as well we can see the heavenly wisdom in wanting to unite the Old and New Worlds in the one Catholic faith, spreading a name that was familiar to the Spanish missionaries (and therefore able to overcome their disbelief) in that it was connected to the famous shrine and then royal monastery of Sant Mary of Guadalupe, founded in Spain two centuries before the Mexican apparitions. The mestizo face of the Virgin is like a prophecy, if we consider that in 1531 the mestizos in Mexico were still a rarity (the Spanish conquest had taken place only ten years before): a prophecy, that is, about the nascent Mexican nation, formed on the ashes of an empire with a religious worship that included constant human sacrifice.

The tilma is made up of two sheets of agave fibers, sewn with a thin thread, on which is seen the olive-toned face of the Virgin, dressed in a pink tunic covered with flowers and cinched over the waist with a dark purple belt, a sign of pregnancy among the Aztecs and at the same time an allegory of the expectation of the divine Son: already this detail is indicative of the power of this image, which in a few symbols contains a very effective catechesis for a people that at the time was almost ignorant of Christ. In short, a wise inculturation of Sacred Scripture. Maria is then covered with a blue mantle full of stars, surrounded by the rays of the sun and with the moon under her feet, emblems that recall the woman of Revelation (Rev 12:1).

The acheiropoietic nature, that is not made by human hands, of the image of Mary was confirmed by various studies carried out from the 17th century to the present day. The first dates back to 1666, when a group of painters and scientists found that the agave fabric was completely devoid of background. They concluded that it was impossible to paint on the tilma such a clear image capable of withstanding the Mexican climate over 135 years of exposure, furthermore without protection from the start, circumstances such as to ruin any painting in much shorter time. In 1751 there began the study of a commission of seven painters led by Miguel Cabrera, which five years later published the following results in a text entitled *Maravilla americana*: the image is not painted; the colors appear as "incorporated" in the texture of the fabric. In 1788 Rafael Gutiérrez painted a copy of the *Morenita* on a cloth similar to the original, with the

techniques and colors known two and a half centuries before, which was protected with a crystal case and displayed near the shrine on the altar of the Pocito chapel: eight years later the painted copy was completely ruined.

Other detailed investigations were carried out in the 20th century, when among other things there was the failure of the attack in 1921 by Luciano Perez Carpio, sent by the Masonic government (five years later there was an uprising of the persecuted Christians, called *cristeros* for the battle cry "Viva Cristo Re," whose flag included the Virgin of Guadalupe). Perez Carpio blew up a bomb at the foot of the altar where the miraculous image is displayed. In 1936 the future Nobel laureate in chemistry, Richard Kuhn, was able to analyze two threads of the tilma preserved as relics, one red and one yellow, and he too ascertained an astonishing fact: those threads do not present any trace of dye, neither animal, nor mineral, nor vegetable.

In 1979, taking forty or so infrared photographs, Philip Serna Callahan identified human interventions around the edges like the silver of the moon, the gold of the rays around the sun and the stars, the white of the clouds; these, however, had already been noticed, criticized, and set down in writing at the time of the investigations in the 17th century and may have been due to an excess of devotion to the Virgin such as to lead to the insertion of decorative elements; at the same time Callahan recognized that the core of the "original figure, including the pink tunic, the blue mantle, the hands, the face and the right foot" appeared incomprehensible to science and "the type of chromatic pigments used is inexplicable."

Also in 1979, the Peruvian engineer José Aste Tonsmann, intrigued by the photographic negatives with which - in previous decades - both photographers and ophthalmologists had claimed to see the head of Saint Juan Diego in the eyes of the Virgin, enlarged the irises of Mary up to 2,500 times: there was found reflected there the whole scene of the miracle of 12 December 1531, with Juan Diego opening the tilma in front of Bishop Zumarraga and other witnesses.

Then there is a last study of the 20th century worthy of note, namely that on the stars of the mantle of the heavenly Mother. The Laplace observatory in Mexico City discovered that those stars are not randomly arranged: their arrangement corresponds to the constellations visible above Tepeyac in the winter solstice of 1531 (which according to the calendar in use at the time fell precisely on December 12), seen however not from a terrestrial but from a cosmic perspective, as an observer would see them from above the celestial vault. An observer, one might add, who looks tenderly at

her children and sends them maternal messages to lead them to salvation.

Patroness of: Mexico and America