

Saint Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin (1474-1548)

Juan Diego was born in 1474 with the name “Cuauhtlatoatzin” (“the talking eagle” in the Nahuatl language) in Cuautlitlan, a small Indian village about 20 kilometers north of modern Mexico City, Mexico. He was a member of the Chichimeca people, one of the more culturally advanced groups living in the Anahuac Valley.

Born before Columbus’s first voyage, he witnessed the Spanish conquest of Mexico by Hernan Cortes in 1521. The first 12 Franciscan missionaries arrived in the area of what is now Mexico City. Juan Diego was a farmer, landowner and weaver of mats. He was married to Maria Lucia. At age 50, in 1524, Juan Diego and his wife were baptized by a Franciscan priest, Father Peter da Gand, one of the first Franciscan missionaries to America. His wife died in 1529.

On Saturday, December 9, 1531, when Juan Diego was walking to Mass and catechetical instructio, he heard the sound of birds singing on Tepeyac Hill and someone calling his name. He saw a Lady, about 14 years old, who resembled an Aztec princess in appearance, and surrounded by light. The Lady spoke to him in Nahuatl, his native language. She called him “little son” (“Xocoyte”) and he responded by calling her “my youngest child” (“Xocoyote”). The Lady asked Juan Diego to tell the bishop of Mexico, a Spanish Franciscan named Juan de Zumarraga, that she wanted a shrine (“teocalli”) to be built on the spot where she stood, in her honor.

According to the *Nican Mopohua*, the first Spanish written source for the story of the apparition, the Lady said:

“I will demonstrate, I will exhibit, I will give all my love, my compassion, my help and my protection to the people. I am your merciful mother, the merciful mother of all of you who live united in this land, and of all mankind, of all those who love me, of those who cry to me, of those who seek me, of those who have confidence in me. Here I will hear their weeping, their sorrow and will remedy and alleviate all their multiple sufferings, necessities and misfortunes.”

Juan Diego recognized the Lady as the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of God. He went to the bishop as instructed. The bishop was doubtful and told Juan Diego he needed a sign. Juan Diego returned to Tepeyac Hill and explained to the Lady that the bishop did not believe him. He implored the Lady to use another messenger, insisting he was not worthy. The Lady insisted that it was very important that it be him to speak to the bishop on her behalf.

On Sunday, Juan Diego went again to the bishop, but again the bishop asked for a sign. Later that day the Lady promised Juan Diego that she would give him a sign the following day. According to the *Nocan Mopohua*, Juan Diego returned to the home of his uncle, Juan Bernardino. His uncle was seriously ill, and the next morning Juan Diego decided not to meet with the Lady, but care for his uncle and to find a priest who could administer the last rites to his dying uncle. The next day, December 12, when he tried to skirt around Tepeyac Hill, the Lady intercepted him, assured him his uncle would not die, and asked him to climb the hill and gather the flowers he found there. She said to him, “Listen to me. Do not let anything bother you, and do not be afraid of any illness, pain or accident. Am I not here, your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? What more could you want? Don’t worry about your uncle. He is well already.”

It was December, when nothing normally blooms in the cold. But he found roses (from the region of Castille in Spain—the former home of Bishop Zumarraga). He brought the roses back to the Lady in his tilma, a cloak made with coarse fibers from the maguey cactus. The Lady rearranged the roses carefully in his tilma and instructed him not to open it before anyone but the bishop. When Juan Diego met the bishop, and opened the tilma to show him the sign he had requested, the roses fell to the floor. The bishop immediately knelt down, because there on the tilma was the image of the Lady who had appeared to Juan Diego, miraculously impressed on the cloth.

On that same day, December 12, the Lady appeared to Juan’s uncle and cured him. Juan Bernardino later went to the bishop and told him how he had been cured. He told the bishop that the Lady wished to be known as “The Perfect Virgin, Holy Mary of Guadalupe.”

Within two weeks Bishop Zumarraga acknowledged the miracle and ordered a shrine to be built where the Virgin Mary had appeared. He entrusted the tilma with the image to Juan Diego, and permitted him to live in a small hermitage near the shrine, and the spot where the Virgin Mary had appeared. Juan Diego told the story to all the pilgrims who came there and cared for the chapel. He died on May 30, 1548, at the age of 74.

Juan Diego was declared venerable in 1987. Pope John Paul II beatified him on May 6, 1990 in the Shrine to Our Lady in Mexico City. The same pope canonized Juan Diego on July 31, 2002. He praised Juan Diego for his simple faith, holiness and as a model of humility.

News of the apparition on Tepeyac Hill spread quickly through Mexico. Over the next ten years, it is estimated that 10 million native peoples were converted to the Catholic Faith.

Our Lady of Guadalupe, as the Virgin Mary of this apparition came to be called, is integral to the faith of Catholics throughout Mexico and the rest of Latin America. In 1754 Pope Benedict XIV declared Our Lady of Guadalupe patron of “New Spain” (what we today call Latin America) and approved liturgical texts for Mass and the Divine Office. In 1895 Pope Leo XIII granted new texts and authorized coronation of the image. Pope Pius X proclaimed her patron of Latin America in 1910. Pope John XXIII invoked her as “Mother of the Americas” in 1961. Pope John Paul II first visited the shrine in the course of his first papal pilgrimage outside of Italy in January 1979. In 1992 he dedicated a chapel to Our Lady of Guadalupe within St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican. At the request of the Special Assembly for the Americas of the Synod of Bishops, Pope John Paul II named Our Lady of Guadalupe patron of the Americas in 1999. Her liturgical celebration on December 12 now has the rank of solemnity throughout all of North, Central and South America.