

# ***Indigenista* Hermeneutics and the Historical Meaning of Our Lady of Guadalupe of Mexico**

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## **Introduction**

Much of the popular literature and Catholic Church pastoral on Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico and the U.S. centers around an interpretive scheme which highlights traits of ancient Mexican (*Aztec*) religion. This *indigenista* hermeneutic framework is of considerable interest for anyone studying matters pertaining to the Guadalupe cultus. *Indigenista* hermeneutics can provide insights into some major themes in Mexican religion (particularly *Guadalupanismo*) and popular conceptions of Mexican nationality and history. Here I will trace the history of this paradigm, discuss its premises, and point out some prominent exegetes responsible for its development and communication.

I will show that the *indigenista* view of Guadalupe represents a relatively recent version of the "sacred hermeneutics" of Mexican history discussed by Lafaye (1977). *Indigenista* hermeneutics has significant pastoral applications for the contemporary Catholic Church in both Mexico and the United States. Perhaps the most eloquent *indigenista* Guadalupan pastoral is that of Father Virgil Elizondo in the U.S. For this reason, I will give added attention to his exegeses and uses of this paradigm.

## **Brief Background on the Guadalupan Image**

As is well known, the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is closely tied to an oral and documentary tradition that in 1531, the Virgin Mary appeared on four occasions to the Nahua Juan Diego on Tepeyac Hill, now in the northern part of Mexico City, asking that a church and devotion be established in her honor there. Subsequently, Mary's image was miraculously stamped onto the Indian's cactus fiber

cloak (*tilma*) and has remained remarkably intact to this day. The image of Guadalupe seems to have aided considerably in the easing of tensions between Indians and Spaniards in the 1530s (cf. Kurtz 1982). Guadalupe became a key symbol and rallying point for the early Mexican proto-patriots of the seventeenth century, was on the first banner of the Independence movement, and became a leading symbol for Zapatista revolutionaries in this century (cf. De la Torre 1985; Turner 1974). Our Lady of Guadalupe is indeed the queen of Mexico's iconography, appearing everywhere throughout that country. Eric Wolf sums it up in his fine discussion of Guadalupe when he calls the image a "master symbol" (1958:34) and remarks that "It [the Guadalupe symbol] is, ultimately, a way of talking about Mexico: a 'collective representation' of Mexican society" (1958:38). This celebrated image today is exhibited over the high altar of the New Basilica in Mexico City. It has become a subject of rising interest among U.S. and European Catholics in recent years.

### Hispanistas and Indigenistas

A longstanding theme in the understanding of Mexican history is that of primary identification with Spain versus identification with native groups of Mesoamerica. The emphasis, or idealization, of one group's contribution over the other's is an old debate. Those Mexicans who would choose to identify historically more strongly with Iberia might be called *hispanistas*. On the other side are those who hold things indigenous to be the truest representation of the glory of Mexico. They may romanticize certain aspects of pre-Hispanic civilizations, such as the poetry of Nezahualcōyotl or the monumentality of pre-Cortesian cities. I will refer to these people as *indigenistas*, while recognizing that this term has also been utilized to designate a special kind of applied anthropology in Mexico (Keen 1971:469).

The Guadalupe symbol is, in Turner's sense, a multivocal symbol, having multiple expressions for different individuals and groups (1975:146, 148-149). It has been caught up many times in the ideological dichotomy I have just outlined. Guadalupe in Mexico has long been linked with dominant society's notions of Mexican "Indian" symbolism and forms of worship. Aspects of the Guadalupan tradition which underlie much of this linkage include the Virgin's choice of a humble Nahua as her envoy to the colonial religious hierarchy. She spoke in classical Náhuatl during her apparitions. Perhaps most significant is that the image is stamped upon an indigenous artifact, a *tilma* of maguay fiber (López 1981a:82).

The image of Guadalupe also represented Iberian religious interests and orthodoxy throughout the colonial period (cf. Harrington 1988:26). The image became the custody of the Archdiocese of Mexico, which was from an early time greatly involved in the promotion of the cultus (Velásquez 1981:252-253). Spaniards and *Criollos* (creoles) considered the Guadalupan Virgin the protectress of their capital city. Thus it was that *La Guadalupana* quickly became a part of Spanish official piety and religious symbolism, alongside the Virgin of the Remedies, the advocacy of Mary to which the Conquistadores had great devotion. During the colonial period, there occurred a synthesis between the ethnic character of the Guadalupe symbol and her tie to the official Spanish colonial order.

In the late 1700s, with the expulsion from Mexico of the Jesuits, an indigenist movement was under way. Such patriots as the exiled Jesuit Father Francisco J. Clavigero elevated the Mexica as exemplars of the greatness of the *Patria Mexicana*, which the native-born creoles defensively claimed over ruling Iberian-born elites. Clavigero's writings especially were an important stimulus for indigenista interpretations of the ancient Mexicans and "did incomparably more [than previous writers on pre-Conquest Mexicans] to provide patriotic Mexican creoles with a glorious native past" (Keen 1971:300). Indigenous Mexican civilization now became a symbol of all that was autochthonous—including the *Criollos*, who were of European descent but born in New Spain. This *Neo-Aztecism* (cf. Phelan 1960) is a philosophical underpinning of today's indigenista hermeneutical analysis of Guadalupe.

### **Indigenista Hermeneutics and the Guadalupan Image**

*Neo-Aztecism* found a great deal of symbolic expression in the 1950s and early 1960s. Public monuments and emblems of state were styled after ancient Mexican motifs. The national shield of the Eagle and the Serpent was *aztecized* after sixteenth-century codices (the Codex Mendocino and the Codex Durán), for example (for a visual comparison of the old and new revolutionary period shields, see Gobierno del Edo de Nuevo León 1969). The Museo Nacional de Antropología was dedicated in 1964 with its grand homage to the Aztecs, the "Sala Mexica."

The move toward indigenista interpretation of the Guadalupe image began around 1950, when public attention to Mexica symbols of identity was on the rise. Since that time, popular views of the meaning of the image and the Guadalupan apparitions have been greatly conditioned by the influential talks and writings of indigenista

exegetes. So influential has this view of Guadalupe become that it has led to a new international understanding of the nature of the origin of the cultus.

It is probable that the Guadalupan indigenista paradigm was inspired largely by various Mexican writers posing the possibility of an original name for the image in Náhuatl, which was then transliterated by the Spaniards to "Guadalupe." This idea dates back all the way to 1666 and Luis Becerra Tanco, a priest fluent in Náhuatl and Otomí (Gutiérrez 1981:12), who suggested that the Virgin might not have enunciated the name "Guadalupe" to Juan Diego's uncle in her final apparition (as the early documents state). Becerra speculated that this was because Nahuas could not pronounce that name properly (for example, the Náhuatl language lacked a /g/ and a /d/), and because a native name would make more symbolic sense to the Nahua (Becerra 1979:9). He proposed the name "Tequantlanopeuh": "She who originated from the summit of the rocks" (1979:9). But since most Guadalupanos took the historical tradition literally, his notion was rarely, if ever, defended.

In the 1890s, however, Mariano Jacobo Rojas of Tepoztlán, Morelos, took up again the idea that Our Lady had asked that her image be venerated under a Náhuatl title. Rojas proposed the term "Coatlaxopeuh," which he interpreted as meaning "The one [feminine] who crushed the serpent's head" (Dávila 1936:14). His student, the distinguished classical Náhuatl scholar Ignacio Dávila Garibi, wrote an extensive defense and exegesis of this name. "Coatlaxopeuh" has been the most widely accepted Náhuatl alternative name for the image in the devotional literature, and there are many more that have been proposed. An indigenista term advanced by Mario Rojas Sánchez is "Tleacuhtlapcupeuh," which means, "She who emerges from the region of light like the Eagle from fire" (Rojas 1978:44-45). He provides a detailed exegesis of this name component by component, based on his reading of Nahua worldview and his great familiarity with modern Náhuatl.

One of the first popularizers of the indigenista approach to Guadalupe was Helen Behrens. She was a resident of Mexico and director of the English language information center at the Basilica in the 1950s. She authored pamphlets and at least one book on the Mexican Virgin (1966). In one widely-read pamphlet, she proclaimed that the image contained a large set of symbols which could only have been perceived as meaningful in 1531 by the peri-Conquest Nahua (Behrens 1952:35-39). The central problem was to link the Guadalupan image to the mass conversions of native Mexicans to

Catholicism in the Valley of Mexico during the 1530s and 40s (a common theme in Guadalupanist literature; cf. *Un Sacerdote 1897*, Vol. II:130-136; Leatham 1982:8). Behrens affirms that, "It was this image [of Guadalupe] that served as the object of visual education . . . combined with her name of Virgin Mary *who crushed the serpent*" that converted the conquered to the faith (1952:35). Later indigenistas write along the same lines. One prominent writer attempts to understand the rapid conversion rate by getting at the "categories of thought of those who first experienced the event [i.e., the time of the apparitions] and codified its meaning" (Elizondo 1980:70).

The central assumption in indigenista interpretation is that the Nahuas read the image like an ancient Mesoamerican codex. By this reading, they were attracted to the Virgin's cultus and converted *en masse* to the religion of their conquerors. Behrens and other indigenistas view the image as a text to be interpreted element by element (Leatham 1982:9). Elizondo writes that the image utilizes the "totality" of Nahua symbolic and glyphic expression, and that interpreters were unneeded to decipher the Virgin's visual message, since the Nahua could read it by simply looking at the image (1980:97). In indigenista hermeneutics, there is the notion that "God . . . always adapts His pedagogy to those who are receivers of [His] message" (Santa Cruz Altillo, A.C. 1981:91). Also, it seems that many indigenistas implicitly hold that the Nahua could not be converted by an image of Mary *qua* Semitic Virgin, but were in need of symbols embedded in the image which they could relate to their old religion (cf. *ibid*:95). To summarize, the indigenista exegete of Guadalupe posits that Mexica religious symbols were supernaturally reproduced in the image of Guadalupe. These features then catalyzed the mass conversions in the native communities of central Mexico shortly after the apparitions of 1531. In fact, one writer (Hernández 1987:9) claims that the image of Guadalupe "constitutes one of the first [New World] catechisms" when understood as a collectivity of symbols.

The details of Behrens' original symbol scheme have been reworked over the years in the popular literature. A major proponent of the indigenista school of pastoral, as it were, is Fr. Mario Rojas Sánchez. His lectures to Mexican civic and religious groups emphasize the existence of Mexican aboriginal symbolic elements in the Guadalupe image, which somehow inspired the natives to opt for Christianity. Rojas has expanded on Behrens' scheme of symbols and has even added some nonreligious elements as well. For example, he has published an exegesis of geographically related indigenous symbols and map features on the image (Rojas and Hernández 1983).<sup>1</sup> In the

United States, Fr. Virgil (Virgilio) Elizondo, mentioned earlier, of the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, is a prominent U.S. proponent and elaborator of this kind of interpretation of Guadalupe (cf. Elizondo 1981, 1983). Elizondo uses indigenista exegesis in conjunction with the pastoral message of Chicano dignity and liberation which has been developing since about 1960 in the southwestern United States (Elizondo 1977:156-158).

It is interesting that indigenista hermeneutics of the image of Guadalupe has an illustrious precursor in the colonial period, Father Miguel Sánchez (1594-1674). Fr. Sánchez was a priest of the Oratory of Saint Philip of Neri in Mexico City. His book of 1648—the first ever published on the Guadalupan apparitions—contains an elegantly written interpretation of the image with reference to Biblical passages and events. Sánchez ties the image and apparitions of the Virgin to a nascent creole ideology of the grandeur of Mexico by interpreting the image's different figures (e.g., the angel, the crescent moon, and the sunburst) in relation to Scripture (cf. Sánchez 1981). Sánchez' style of interpretation may have been an inspiration to (at least) Fr. Elizondo in the formulation of his view of the image. Elizondo states, "Sánchez awoke the theological imagination not only of his contemporaries but also of those who would come after" (1980:106). Though Fr. Sánchez' approach did not in any way involve reference to Nahua concepts, it could be said to be of nationalist orientation (De la Maza 1949:170-171). He attempted to show God's predilection for Mexico as symbolized by elements in the Virgin's picture (Leatham 1982:8; Rodríguez 1980:95-105). This is one of the major implications of the indigenista paradigm as well. Referring in part to Sánchez' writings, Jacques Lafaye has commented that, "Mexican historiography was, in its beginning, a sacred hermeneutics . . ." (1977:418). In the work of Guadalupano exegetes, such as Elizondo, there is clearly still a strong current of sacred hermeneutics blended with secular historiography of Mexico.

### **Mexica Symbols in the Image**

Fr. Elizondo has written:

The miraculousness [of the image of Guadalupe] lies in the fact that it is a fascinating constellation of signs from all the heavens and from all the mythologies: from the New Testament Apocalypse to the Iberian Catholicism to the pre-Columbian world of symbolic expression. (1980:70)

This discussion now turns to some of the more important indigenous "signs" from the ancient Mexicans' religious world, which indigenistas

identify in the Virgin's image. Most of them date back to Behrens' material of the 50s. The majority of the figures taken as Mexica symbols appear, to the uninformed, to be simply ornamental features without special theological importance.

While the colonial Spaniards may have seen in the image the "woman clothed with the sun" of the Apocalypse (Apoc. 12:1-3), the unconverted Nahua supposedly perceived a woman blocking out the radiance or strength of Tonatiuh, Sun Lord of the Mexica (Behrens 1952:36; Elizondo 1980:85). Behrens identified the moon under the Virgin's feet as symbolic of a phase of the planet Venus, associated with Quetzalcóatl, now burned out and blackened. Behrens believed that the conquered Nahua interpreted this sign as the subjection of the cultus of the Plumed Serpent to Mary and the religion she represented (1952:35). Harrington states, "For the Indians, it was natural to place a goddess above one of her primary symbols, the moon. If the Spaniards had destroyed the solar cult of Huitzilopochtli and human sacrifice, this new incarnation revealed that the lunar goddess had overshadowed the solar god for a time and ushered in a new age" (1988:34). According to Elizondo, the stars on the Virgin's mantle announced the end of a civilization and the beginning of a new epoch—Mexica priests divined the end of their calendar cycle by watching the stars (Elizondo 1980:84). Behrens sees the stars as signifying that Mary commands the firmament (Behrens 1952:36). Harrington links the starry mantle with the "star-skirt" of the Aztec mother goddess, Tonantzin (1988:32-33). Fr. Elizondo has interpreted the colors of the Virgin's attire according to ethnohistorical knowledge of color meanings in Mexica cosmology and relates them to the power of the image to inspire conversions. For instance, the blue-green of the mantle stands for the "royal" color of the gods, the color of the god Ome-Téotl, and the center of the Mesoamerican cross (1980:84). He also views the angel bearing the Virgin as parallel to the Nahua notion of the gods carrying time on their backs; thus the angel may symbolize entry into a new era (1980:84).

Fr. Rojas, mentioned above, has lectured on an exegesis of a figure he feels had to attract the Nahua's attention. This exegesis is an innovative interpretation of a figure, appearing just beneath the black sash around the Virgin's waist, which is similar in form to the pictoglyph for Nahui Ollin (Four Movement), the Mesoamerican cross. This was a fundamental symbol in Mexica religion, evoking the center and ends of the universe and cosmic forces (cf. León-Portilla 1978:45-47). Some exegetes view the sash itself as symbolic of Mary's pregnancy, and thus the positioning of this symbol over her womb

symbolizes the immense power of the divine Christ-child, about to be born in Mexico through evangelization (Bonnet-Eymard 1980:30-32; Elizondo 1980:85).

The list of Nahuatl symbolic elements seems remarkably variable if one scans the lectures and writings of indigenista Guadalupanists. They all frequently generalize or extrapolate from ethnohistorical scholarship (such as that of León-Portilla), combining somewhat simplified notions about "Indian" belief systems with eclectic exegesis. As in Elizondo's quote above, Guadalupe's influence on conversion lies largely in the conjunction of all those figures and colors, providing a complex *gestalt* or visual message to the conquered. Fr. Rojas, like Fr. Elizondo, is of the opinion that the image represents a codex with a subtle combination of indigenous as well as European "messages," which served to evangelize the New World's inhabitants (Hernández 1987:14).<sup>2</sup>

Today, Mexican and foreign visitors to the Basilica of Guadalupe may hear tour guides explain the significance of the aforementioned symbols in the conversion of the Nahuatl. It appears that most of the popular literature on Guadalupe in both Mexico and the United States incorporates indigenista hermeneutical views.

### Image Studies and Indigenista Hermeneutics

The indigenista hermeneuticians' notion that the indigenous (pre-Conquest) symbolic content of the image was instrumental in the conversion of the Aztecs rests on the belief that that content was divinely "designed" into the miraculous image. In recent years, a fascinating study by a U.S. scientist has challenged this basic assumption before the general public.

In 1979, Dr. Philip Serna Callahan, a biophysicist affiliated with the University of Florida, conducted an infrared photographic investigation into the composition of the image in the Basilica. His preliminary findings have interesting implications for the indigenista exegeses. Callahan (1981) has described numerous overlays of pigments upon a primitive (original) image, without an underdrawing, and has suggested the composition of the colorants. Among the "retouches" he finds are the moon, sun rays, sash, all gold ornamentation (including the stars and the Nahuatl Ollin figure), to mention a few. Dr. Callahan's research has already been translated into Spanish in Mexico and published with the support of the Archdiocese of Mexico (Callahan and Smith 1981). Callahan contends, like art critics before him, that the additions he identifies are simply (and rather obviously, to him) International Gothic ornaments typical



of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spanish paintings of the Virgin Mary (Callahan 1981:8). Callahan's monograph also raises the possibility that some or all of the decorative elements were painted some time after the original was produced, perhaps toward the second half of the sixteenth century, when the mass conversions of the Valley of Mexico had already attenuated (cf. Leatham 1982). Some indigenistas have responded by denying the validity of Callahan's methods (e.g., he had to estimate his camera apertures) and results. They claim that the "unity" of the "codified messages" within the image negates the possibility of motifs being added by humans (Hernández 1987:14).

### Conclusion

Indigenista hermeneuticians have found in the Virgin of Guadalupe a symbol composed of many symbols, capable of reconciling their admiration for the native Mexican cultures while also approving of the Christian colonizers' program of evangelization. The Virgin is often referred to as a *mestiza* (person of mixed Indian and Spanish heritage) who mediates between the Spanish belief system and the religious sensitivities of the indigenous Mexicans. Fr. Elizondo (1983:44) writes, "She combines opposing forces so that in a creative way new life, not destruction, will emerge" (cf. also 1983:86).

At the same time, indigenista pastoral possesses a potent framework for talking about issues of social inequality. The Virgin is perceived as arraying herself with the symbols of the conquered, whose potential cultural and religious contribution to the faith was largely ignored by the conquerors. So it is that this paradigm serves as a strong voice within the U.S. Catholic community (especially in Elizondo's writings), clamoring for recognition of the Mexican contribution to the enrichment of North American Catholic life. Overall, indigenista Guadalupan pastoral emphasizes the importance of the poor to God and the Virgin, and the significance of the poor as models for the Church. Fr. Elizondo sums up the implications of his pastoral when he states that:

The symbolism of *La Morenita* opened up a new possibility for racio-cultural dialogue and exchange. The synthesis of the religious iconography of the Spanish with that of the indigenous peoples into a single, coherent symbol-image ushered in a new, shared experience. The missionaries and the people now had an authentic basis for dialogue. What the missionaries had been praying for had now come in an unexpected (and for some, unwanted) way. (Elizondo 1983:12)

Father Elizondo's use of an indigenista hermeneutical approach can be viewed as a pastoral call to end isolation and alienation of the

Mexican in the U.S. Catholic Church. The Virgin of Guadalupe may serve as a symbol of mediation and dialogue between groups of differing status and cultural backgrounds within the Church today as in the colonial period. To a large degree, the Virgin can mediate because, according to an indigenista interpretation, the image of Guadalupe encodes key elements out of Mexico's indigenous heritage while also being historically linked to the emergence of a Catholic Mexico under Spain. In this way, *mestizaje*, Mexicans' mixed cultural heritage, is given divine sanction, providing an ideological basis for religious empowerment and greater appreciation of the Mexican presence among the "People of God."

What is most significant about indigenista Guadalupan exegesis is that indigenista Guadalupanists—particularly of the clergy—continue the elaboration of a Mexican historical "sacred hermeneutics," which dates back to the time of Fr. Miguel Sánchez. In the modern case, early colonial and modern academic ethnohistorical sources provide data and interpretation, which then are woven into an ideological framework rich in innovative, highly contextual symbolism. The result, for indigenistas, is a revised and supposedly deeper understanding of the significance of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Mexican heritage for the salvation history of the Americas.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Father Rojas has apparently published little on indigenous symbolism in the image. However, he has become an important promoter of this view of Guadalupe through the lecture circuit. The author is familiar with his ideas from a lecture he gave in 1982.

A writer closely associated with Fr. Rojas has stated that, ". . . there are solid arguments in favor of the idea that the image corresponds to a codex with innumerable inscribed messages. [The image] constitutes the most important means of evangelizing that the colonizing missionaries of the New World could have chosen. The glyphs of Tepeyac, the mountains, the "Nahui Ollin," the glyphs for Venus, the matching of geographical places, the positioning of the stars, the interpretation of the colors, the meaning of the *quincunce* (Mesoamerican cross) as the center of movement and giver of life, the glyphic symbolism of the date of the apparition . . . demonstrate this to be so (Hernández 1987:9).

<sup>2</sup> Indigenista-style interpretation has been applied by some writers to the original text or the main document on the apparitions, known as the *Nican Mopohua*, in the form of commentary along with translation from Náhuatl to Spanish. Notable examples of this are Rojas' (1978) and Siller's (1981) translations and annotations of the *Nican Mopohua*.

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