

# LA HISTORIA DE LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE

## *An Account of the Neighborhood Parish and Events That Inspired Its Name*

By Roberto "Rob" Camacho

As the year draws to an end, December is an important month of significance for many followers of the Roman Catholic faith. Not only does the beginning of the month mark the start of Advent, a season observed by Roman Catholics and other branches of Christianity marked as preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus Christ at Christmas; and celebrating the return of Christ as well.

Needless to say, the season is peppered with variety and nuance among different celebrations. Mixing Christian and pagan traditions across different churches and regions; as well as contrasts between western and eastern orthodoxies. However, for millions of Mexicans that practice the Roman Catholic faith, the twelfth of the month also marks another celebration of significance within the church; the feast day of the Virgen de Guadalupe.

It's hard to understate just how powerful and omnipresent Catholicism is in Mexican culture. In fact, in many ways, religion has such sway amongst the Mexican diaspora that it even holds influence on aspects of non-secular Mexican culture as well. And perhaps nowhere is that more prevalent and obvious than the iconography of the Virgen de Guadalupe; a Catholic title of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ.

It's an understatement to say that the Virgen de Guadalupe is an iconic figure in Mexican culture. Whether found inside the walls and stained-glass windows of churches or captured in paint and brush strokes across thousands of murals, to countless tributes rendered in ink on the body art of millions; or inside of



Photos by Soni López-Chávez

our parents and grandparents homes, her image and likeness can be found practically everywhere throughout Mexican culture. A figure instantly recognizable, that was a common sight for many of us growing up.

And that's not by accident. In fact, many historians sight the Virgen de Guadalupe's origin story which dates back to the 16th-century in colonial-era Mexico as a pivotal moment in Catholicism taking root in Mexico and becoming the dominant religion of the land for both Spanish colonists and Indigenous Mexicans alike.



Even following the conquest of Tenochtitlán and the fall of the Mexica Empire, in spite of multiple concerted efforts by the Spanish to convert Mexico and other Indigenous groups (oftentimes by violent force) many Indigenous Mexicans still practiced the religious ceremonies and traditions of Pre-Columbian cultures in Mexico.

According to legend, in 1531 a Nahua man, a Catholic convert who had been baptized

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as Juan Diego witnessed an apparition of the Virgin Mary on four separate occasions at the hill of Tepeyac. A then rural area on the edges of Mexico City that was formerly the site of the temple of the Mexica goddess Tonāntzin destroyed by the Spanish nearly a decade earlier in the conquest.

The Virgin Mary spoke to Juan Diego in his native, Nahuatl tongue and instructed him to go to the bishop and build a church on top of the hill of Tepeyac; saying that doing so would protect the Mexican people. Juan Diego went to the archbishop, Juan de Zumárraga, but was rebuked by the skeptical bishop who dismissed the encounter due to lack of any proof. Again, the Virgin Mary appeared to Juan Diego several more times with the same message.

Several days later Juan Diego's uncle, Juan Bernardino had fallen gravely ill and Juan Diego was sent to bring a Catholic priest to hear his Uncle's final death-bed confession.

In order to avoid being delayed by the Virgin once more, Juan Diego chose an alternative route around the hill of Tepeyac, but the Virgin again intercepted him and asked where he was going.

After explaining his ordeal, the Virgin assured Juan Diego that his Uncle would recover and instructed him to climb the hill of Tepeyac. Upon returning to the top of the hill Juan Diego discovered a bed of Castilian roses (which were not indigenous to Mexico) blooming on the barren hill in the cold month of December. The Virgin instructed Juan Diego to wrap the flowers in his tilmàtli (sash) and take them back to bishop Zumárraga.

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li before the archbishop, the flowers he had gathered on hill falling to the floor, revealing an image of the Virgin Mary depicted as a beautiful, Indigenous maiden embellished onto the fabric of his tilmàtli. Ever since, the image has been known as Our Lady of Guadalupe.

While the actual historical accuracy of the account has been questioned over the centuries, nonetheless many historians point the elements of the Virgin appearing to Juan Diego, an Indigenous man (as opposed to a Spanish priest or clergy), speaking in Nahuatl and manifesting herself as an Indigenous or mestiza woman as a turning point for Mexico's Indigenous populations warming up to Catholicism which was being imposed by colonists throughout the nation.

In the coming years, millions of Indigenous Mexicans would be baptized or converted into the Catholic faith as a result. Likewise, the

Virgin's appearance at the former site of Tonāntzin's temple at the top of the hill at Tepeyac also further fed into the religious syncretism incorporating Roman Catholic religious traditions and Indigenous practices/beliefs creating new blended customs.

Today hundreds of fiestas are held all across Mexico on December 12th for Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe, with thousands of Catholics from throughout Mexico and around the world making pilgrimages to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the shrine founded on the original site on Tepeyac Hill in Mexico City.

Photo by Suzi Moon.

Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe is also celebrated across the Southwestern United States and other



parts of the nation with large Mexican communities. Barrio Logan, of course, is no exception with the neighborhood's own parish owing its namesake to Our Lady of Guadalupe herself.

The parish began as a mission of the Parish of Our Lady of the Angels and eventually went on to become the Mexican national parish of San Diego in 1917, christened with the name Our Lady of Guadalupe. Due to the ongoing Mexican revolution, many Mexicans began migrating to the U.S. as the Mexican government began clamping down on the Catholic church. Many of those who fled made new homes and lives in Barrio Logan.

In fact, many exiled priests from Mexico ended up at the parish as well, and since then the parish has been a beacon and sanctuary for Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans in the neighborhood across multiple generations. Our Lady of Guadalupe has gone through many changes throughout the decades.

As the years progressed and more masses throughout San Diego were performed in Spanish it became less and less necessary for the parish to be exclusively a Mexican national parish; as more and more Spanish speakers could receive services at various churches. Eventually in 2010, at the request of pastor Robert Fambri, SJ Our Lady of Guadalupe was no longer designated a Mexican national parish but continues to be the parish of the community.

While no longer an exclusively Mexican parish, Our Lady of Guadalupe's inseparable connection to the Mexican community of San Diego remains.



Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than Our Lady of Guadalupe's celebration honoring the event which it owes its namesake. The annual procession in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe which will be held on December 1st, where the parish and hundreds from other churches and dioceses will march from San Diego City College to the Civic Center.

The tradition of the annual procession began more than forty years ago with the help of Father Richard Brown, the beloved pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe who served the parish for forty-five years. In fact, in its first year, the procession began at the parish and included floats, mariachi bands and even low riders from local car clubs.

In more recent years processions have consisted of various floats decorated with colorful flowers followed by parishioners and a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Mexica danzantes donning colorful regalia, burning fragrant sage and playing drums regularly join in the processions as well; while children posed around cacti and radiant flowers reenact the scene of Juan Diego kneeling before the Virgen de Guadalupe.



Needless to say, over the decades the procession honoring Our Lady of Guadalupe has become not just a fixture in the neighborhood but of San Diego as a whole. And while the parade has grown and the routes and locations may have changed over the years its spirit and essence still remain the same; not unlike the parish itself. Which, to this day, still remains a beacon of hope,

community, and belonging for many in the Barrio.