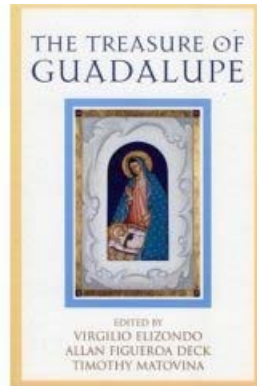


The Treasure of Guadalupe

Celebrating Faith Series: Explorations in Latino Spirituality and Theology



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“Till There Was You”

Cecilia González-Andrieu

There were bells on a hill,
But I never heard them ringing.
No, I never heard them at all,
Till there was you.

There were birds in the sky,
But I never saw them winging.
No, I never saw them at all,
Till there was you.

Then there was music and wonderful roses,
They tell me, in sweet fragrant meadows of dawn and you.

There was love all around,
But I never heard it singing.
No, I never heard it at all,
Till there was you.¹

It is doubtful that the composer of the Broadway musical “The Music Man” knew the story of our Lady of Guadalupe, yet one cannot help but be struck by the amazing resemblance of what is described here to the events of Tepeyac . The story of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the song, “Till There Was You” are both about the extraordinary power that Beauty has to completely change the way we experience the world around us. Until “there was you...” our Lady up on the hill of Tepeyac, an entire people could not see, hear, or feel God’s love. Today, she brings us that very same gift.

Can we hear the birds, or has the world grown silent for us? And most importantly, are we capable anymore of truly feeling ourselves loved by God?

During the extraordinarily new moments of the early Christian community's life the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "You are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by all, shown to be a letter of Christ administered by us, written not in ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are hearts of flesh." (2 Cor. 3: 2-3). There was a vibrant freshness and an amazing urgency to the word of God in the early Church, and a sense that all of it was tied to our hearts, to hearts that were soft enough to both delight and bleed.

The loss of the aliveness of the world and of religious language is not something new to our generation, but has threatened every generation since religious discourse became habitual, and religious imagery ceased being astonishing. What is familiar, what is automatic, begins to disappear right before our eyes, and so, language about God that communicates love and acceptance no longer reaches us. Back in the 1920's, one particularly insightful scholar explained the silencing of the world this way,

... held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness.
Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture,
at our wives, and at our fear of war.
If the complex life of many people takes place entirely on
the level of the unconscious, then it's as if this life had
never been.
And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to
make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man [sic]
has been given the tool of art.ⁱⁱ

In order to "make a stone feel stony", in other words, precisely to return to the overly familiar the power of newness and surprise, we have been given art. This particular scholar does not say who this "giver" of art is, but as believers in a universe with an author, we recognize all gifts as coming from God. Thus, with this special God-given power art has to make creation visible, relevant and new, it is no coincidence that

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art and religion have been two sides of a coin for many millennia of human experience; “Till there was you,” although a patently secular love song, certainly can be sung as a song of praise to God. Thus, if religion does not also make a “stone feel stony,” does not allow us to “feel” the love that is all around and wake up to creation in its splendor and its sorrow, religion has become irrelevant and can no longer announce the Reign of God. Art and religion must work together to help us to see and hear that which has become commonplace, that which we can no longer glimpse or understand. Religion providing the content, art has the power to explode before our astonished senses. What is beautiful can make us look up and take notice of that which we need, vitally, to know.

The apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe fit into no stereotypes of Christian preaching that anyone could have conjured up in the middle of the sixteenth century; everything about this event was new, everything about the drama at Tepeyac spoke eloquently, not about a Reign of God yet to come in some other place, but about a Reign of God radically infusing our very world. Our Lady of Guadalupe came as a woman who knows that those around her need love, care and healing. Because of her, all of us from Juan Diego to today can look up and feel loved.

Yet, from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it is very difficult for us to see the newness in Our Lady of Guadalupe, her image has become overly familiar, reproduced on everything from tattoos to mugs and t-shirts. The miracle of her enduring presence on Juan Diego’s *tilma* is locked away behind glass in a Basilica, and many of us relate to it just as we would to any other nice painting in a museum which seems remote and, dare we say it?...pretty. Has Our Lady of Guadalupe become a stereotypical cliché which we no longer see? Not if we are able to see the intense beauty, the gift of artistic

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miracles which converge in this one event. Let's turn the clock back then and situate ourselves in the world that witnessed her irruption for the first time.

On the eve of the moment when the "Lady from heaven" called out to Juan Diego, his world, the world of the Aztecs and of the people of America was going through its darkest hour. The contrast was savage, the tragedy unspeakable. The Aztec empire at the time extended from the Gulf of Mexico down into present day Guatemala. Aztec culture was a hybrid of the civilizations they had conquered and supplanted -- the Toltecs, Mayas, and Zapotecs. The "Indian" Quauhtlatotzin, the future Juan Diego, was born into a society where religion and its aesthetic manifestation and expression held a privileged place in the community's life. Even as the conquerors were disembarking on the beach, the Aztec emperor and his court prepared to meet the Spaniards arrayed in their finest ornaments and carrying trays of the most fragrant flowers. Beauty and the constant terror of death existed side by side for the Aztecs.

The capital city of Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) was built on two islands in the middle of a lake festooned with floating gardens. Walls of purest white and causeways arrayed over canals connected the imperial city to the mainland. The effect was so splendid that the Spaniards dubbed it "another Venice." This was the world that Juan Diego and his community knew one day, and then it was no more. As one of the eyewitnesses describes it in a poem scholars date to the period,

Nothing but flowers and songs of sorrow
are left in Mexico and Tlatelolco,
where once we saw warriors and wise men.
... We are crushed to the ground;
We lie in ruins.
There is nothing but grief and suffering
In Mexico and Tlatelolco,

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Where once we saw beauty and valor.ⁱⁱⁱ

After Cortez' victory, the native population, displaced and demoralized, was physically dying not only from the carnage of war but from European diseases. But, the natives were dying another kind of agonizing death...the loss of their identity and with it their will and desire to live. The anonymous poet of "Flowers and Songs of Sorrow," understood the place of beauty in the lives of the people, and in the end, he desperately clung to the image of flowers and sorrowful songs as the last vestige of their shared identity.

So we see here, not stony stones, but fragrant flowers carried by the nobles to greet Cortéz and flowers as the last breath of a dying people; it is flowers that Our Lady of Guadalupe offers as hope. As the conquered people understood all too well, without beauty the reasons to live disappear, without beauty what is good and what is true fades from sight. A stone that is no longer stony cannot be used to build...anything. The tragedy of a people which had suffered cruelty at the hands of its own warrior class, and now trembled in the grip of new warriors from distant lands moved Heaven -- and Beauty was sent.

Our Lady of Guadalupe came then (as now) as a dramatic narrative preserved in both poetry and a luminous painting. Everything about her encounter with humanity surprises. It is before dawn, and a poor widowed man, a native who has been baptized with a new name (which perhaps does not feel truly *his* yet), is on his way to Church and to his daily cares. The first inkling Juan Diego has that something extraordinary is happening is the song of the birds, not only is the song exceedingly beautiful, but it seems

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to him that the hills are answering. Juan Diego looks up from his lonely road, one that he has traveled many times over, he looks up surprised by encountering beauty in a world that had long ceased being beautiful. Juan Diego is seized by that beauty, grasped to a degree that turns into contemplation and leads him to ask difficult questions.

It is a singular moment of intense honesty, no fire and brimstone has been hurled at him, no eternal punishment has been threatened. None of the clichés of “conversion” are apparent here, rather, Juan Diego is taken into his own heart, and into his own people’s traditions to ask the questions that all of his people need to ask. The questions we today still need to ask. “Am I worthy of what I hear?” Without even glimpsing the Lady whose arrival the sweet music is heralding, Juan Diego, faced with the beauty of the world around him, has to come face to face with his own feelings of worthlessness.

A conquered people, a people who could no longer recognize their home, perhaps a people who also felt deep within them their own sin...were they worthy of beauty? It is their human dignity and that of their world that the beautiful music from birds and mountains comes to rebuild, and the process will not be easy. Juan Diego will be beset by doubt, by feeling himself a nobody, and by being treated as insignificant by the church authorities who are about to hear his astounding tale. The Lady, the young mother who waits just beyond the music, will ask him to believe, not only in the living God, in her Son who has redeemed the world; the Lady comes to ask him to believe in himself, in his own voice and to be a herald of his community’s value and goodness.

Are we worthy of God’s love? Is this question not the one that most often stands between us and God? Juan Diego even does a bit of rationalizing -- this could all be a dream after all? He could be imagining all this? A person who has suffered much is

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afraid to believe in what is beautiful, because losing it again would be unbearable. Is this what Juan Diego is feeling? Will he and his people learn to believe? Have we learned to believe that we are worthy?

As Virgilio Elizondo has pointed out, the Guadalupe event “marked the birth of a new Church: the Word of God enriching the situation and bringing newness out of the old, beauty out of the chaos, family out of previous strangers and enemies.” Yes, what Juan Diego and his community are called to by Our Lady is not a recovery of their old identity, broken and trampled by conquest, but rather growth, transformation and the fostering of their own prophetic voice into a *new* humanity. The human cycle of conquered and conqueror, of master and slave, of powerful and insignificant will continue unless Juan Diego, and every single one of us, risks doing something different.

Mary, who dares to say that God throws the mighty from their thrones and lifts the lowly (Luke 1:51-53) is clear with Juan Diego that she understands that the “lowly” cannot regain their voice alone. This is what her gift of beauty brings, for the cycle of oppression and oppressed to end, this new voice must arise from a place within the oppressed which is full of abundance, full of the expansive desire to share the world, not hoard it, otherwise, although the positions will be reversed, the cycle will continue.

The condition which surrounds Juan Diego of mutual exclusion, suspicion and exploitation seems like one of the most basic tragic flaws of humanity. It is this world that lies just beyond the beauty of that hill where Juan Diego meets the Lady; it encircles him with its specter of poverty, of non-being, and of death. It is even made explicit in the

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narrative by his uncle's impending loss. Juan Diego veers off the road away from the Lady because his uncle is dying from the diseases brought by the Europeans. Juan Diego is frantic to find some help, some care for the dying man. This is important; we can see that the urgency of worldly cares threatens his journey toward regaining his voice just as surely as his self-doubt does. Yet, the cares are real, his uncle's death is real, the inability to find help for him is real. We want to walk toward a new being, but how can we, when the old being demands so much of us? The answer that Our Lady's story reveals is clear, -- God's Reign does not mean an end to worldly cares, nor does it demand that we ignore these in order to follow the path up the hill. No, God's Reign means we are not alone, that God takes those cares right into God. The Lady does not wait in the appointed place, but seeing Juan Diego's affliction comes down the path to meet him, and then assures him that his uncle will be well.

This is a moment in the story when the Christian must experience something like a mirror --on the one hand, we are Juan Diego, grieved, hurried, fearful, and yet, if the Juan Diegos of the world are to be helped to gain their voice, we must also be the Lady. We, like her, must be willing to go out of our way to walk toward those who need us. We like her, must be willing to take up their cares with them, to lighten their loads, so they may continue to walk. Guadalupe's beauty is in her very dynamism, in her willingness to do what must be done, so that the voice of the new people of America will rise.

Beyond this, though, this moment in the story strikes us with the paradoxical nature of human existence. In the act of avoiding the Lady so he may get help for his

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uncle, we also witness a compassionate and desperate man, who having already lost his wife, is now facing the death of another he loves. There is no shame for Juan Diego in carrying the burden of his loss, but rather, it is an emblem of those qualities in him which the Lady comes to re-awaken. In his smallness, and in his grief, Juan Diego stands as an instance of all those who, having very little, will give even that little away. Juan Diego represents an entire people, an entire world, and in the desperation of choosing between faithfulness to his uncle, pitted against the very real, and the quite political, admonition from the Lady to confront those in power, we can recognize ourselves. This moment of conflict is pivotal to the story; as Aristotle pointed out many centuries ago, “pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man [sic] like ourselves.” We are moved by Juan Diego at this moment to look inside our own hearts, how many times have we failed at either of these options, the one of taking care of those who need us immediately in the here and now – as his uncle does, or the option of looking up, envisioning a different world, and defying the odds to raise our voices to build it? The intricate beauty of the Guadalupe story is that without shaming or blaming, it calls us to a better “us.” The flowers are there, up on the hillside, incongruously growing in the icy ground, but we must go gather them.

As Pope John Paul II has reminded us, “true love sets no conditions; it does not calculate or complain, but simply loves.” In the gift of exquisite beauty, of birdsong and flowers, of a woman who brings comfort and also challenges, and in a poor man who raises his voice and with it a People, we recognize this most difficult of callings – to simply love. And it is just at this moment that we look up, and the voice of God reaches

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us anew and renewed and enfolds us, like Juan Diego's warm mantle. The Lady brings the heavens in her starry veil, Juan Diego brings us and all the earth in his roughly woven mantle – and they both meet in the flowers, overflowing, in the miracle of the beautiful, incomprehensible, unexpected gift, of being simply loved by God.

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ⁱ“The Music Man” by Meredith Willson, Broadway opening, 1957.

ⁱⁱ Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky and Benjamin Sher, *Theory of Prose*, 1st American ed. ([Elmwood Park, IL, USA: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990).

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