

Our Lady at a Time of Pandemic

Homily for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe 2020

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Today we celebrate Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas. But take a good look: her apparitions in 1531 on the Tepeyac hill occur at a time like ours. They come at a time of pandemic.

"Cocoliztli" was the Nahuatl name for this disease that affected thousands of people in ancient Mexico. Studies suggest that this disease comes

from the Salmonella family. This type of bacteria appears to be, at least in part, responsible for the outbreaks of 1520, 1545, 1576, 1736, and 1813.



That is why San Juan Diego was on his way to see his sick uncle. He suffered from this dreaded "cocoliztli" disease as he was approaching death. On the way to the house of his uncle, when he went to take care of his sick uncle, Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to him. The four apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe are recorded in Nahuatl in the "Nican Mopohua," the Nahuatl phrase meaning "here recorded."

Many of you know the story better than I do. Our Lady tells the humble and meek Juan Diego to go to the bishop and tell him to build a church so that she can offer mercy and comfort to her people. Juan Diego receives the message, but then he goes to take care of his sick uncle.

The next day, to avoid Our Lady, he returns to visit his sick uncle by another route. But she appears to him again and repeats the same request. Juan Diego responds that he is not worthy to go to a bishop. He is a Nahuatl indigenous. He suggests that he should send someone more important with more stature and seriousness. A Spanish version suggests that St. Juan Diego said this, "I am nothing more than a plank ladder." "I am so humble that I am like a board that people walk on."

But Our Lady insists. "To you." she tells him. "I have chosen you." "You," she insists. "I want you to go." Notice well! Our Lady does not demand that Juan Diego stop caring for his sick uncle. Juan Diego had already lost his parents to this same epidemic. Now Juan Diego faces the loss of his beloved uncle Juan Bernardino, who became a new father to him. The loss seems unbearable. Our Lady does not demand that he stay away from her sick uncle.

Rather, knowing her care for the sick, Our Lady asks Juan Diego to expand the mission beyond her sick uncle. She wants him, and only him, to go to the bishop so that everyone knows the consoling help and the mercy that she wants to offer to all of her children, including Juan Diego.

Let me invite you to pause at this point in the account, given our own challenges with COVID-19. Many of us were busy caring for the sick with COVID-19. Some of us have attended more funerals due to COVID-19 than we want to remember. Some also suffer from loneliness and isolation due to "social distancing." In turn, we have seen a doubling of opioid overdose deaths.

We are not all doing well. Perhaps some time contemplating the specific image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is the precise meditation we need right now. We can see precisely what San Juan Diego sees. This is the only apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary where she is visibly pregnant. The artistically woven designs on her dress are actually Aztec symbols of fertility. They reminded the Aztec peoples of then, and us today, that, in fact, the Blessed Virgin Mary is not only the mother of Jesus, but that she is fully capable of giving birth to us and being our mother as well.

Perhaps what is not noticed by us in the "Nican Mopohua" is the fifth appearance. This apparition is not for Juan Diego. It was for his uncle, Juan Bernardino. Not only does she appear to Juan Diego in Tepeyac, but she appears to Juan Bernardino while he remains at home sick and in bed. He is miraculously healed.

Given the tensions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, we may wish to pay more attention to this fifth appearance of Blessed Juan Bernardino. In the isolation of our illness, the Blessed Virgin Mary is there to comfort us as well. When we cannot be with family or friends, we can invite her to be with us.

In this season of Advent, the presence of Mary accentuates our daily and Sunday scriptures. May we follow her just as she shares herself and her Son, Jesus, with us. May we find in her our comfort and the care we need during this time of pandemic. Know that I am praying for all of you.

Photo: St. Paul Cathedral, "Our Lady of Guadalupe Visits Blessed Juan Bernardino."