



Knights of Columbus

# The Secrets of Her Image



Faith in Action

Faith



# The Secrets of Her Image

## Guadalupan Codex

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The marvelous image of Holy Mary of Guadalupe is captured on St. Juan Diego's humble *tilma* (cloak) made of fibers from the *izótl* (giant yucca) plant. It offers the true message of God's love for indigenous peoples and for people of all cultures, reflecting the theological imagery found in the book of Revelation: "A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet. ... She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth" (Rev 12: 1-2). It also recalls these words: "I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them [as their God]. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away.'" (Rev 21: 2-4).

St. John Paul II described Our lady of Guadalupe as the perfect model of inculturation; she comes to the indigenous people through their own customs and their cultural practices. To fully understand the image, then, we must turn to the viewpoints of the indigenous people — especially the native *tlamatinime* (wise men), who used complex pictography — and those of several scientific disciplines.

## Her Eyes

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The Virgin's lovely eyes appear merciful and compassionate, but they do more than portray human emotion. Scientific researchers have proven that each of her eyes reflect a number of figures. The reflections appear just as they would in a living person, with each cornea reflecting a mirror image of



the other. These images reveal the people who witnessed the first unveiling of the tilma.

## Her Face

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The face of Holy Mary of Guadalupe is that of a young lady of great beauty. Appearing tender, merciful, loving and compassionate, her head is angled downward in a sign of humility; and although she stands in front of the sun, treads upon the moon and is dressed in stars, she herself is not a god. She bows before one greater than she. The coloring of her face indicates that she is a *mestiza* (of mixed race), indicating that she belongs to both the Spaniards and the natives, and thus to all people.

## The Brooch

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The Virgin wears an oval-shaped brooch with a cross in the center. Spaniards saw the cross as illustrating the depth of Jesus' sacrifice for us. Meanwhile, for the natives, the brooch recalled the semiprecious stones that were placed between the neck and chest of their stone idols. Each stone, called "the heart of the divinity," would be polished until it gleamed and reflected the face of the person who stood before it. When the native people observed the cross within the Virgin's brooch, they saw it as reflecting the sacrifice of God's love. Through her loving heart, the natives came to understand the complex mysteries of God's sacrifice on the cross and His great love for humanity — a love so deep that, even as He was dying, led Him to give His own mother as mother of the whole world.



## The Four-Petalled Flower

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Positioned directly under the black sash and immediately over the Virgin's womb is a unique four-petaled jasmine flower. The flower is central to understanding the message and identity of the Virgin and her child. First, its four petals represent the

four cardinal directions (north, south, east and west). Second, the parts of the flower also correspond to the native people's theological representation of a singular living and true deity. By utilizing the natives' rich cosmological thought in this way, the Virgin welcomes all people, whatever their nationality or ethnicity, to know her Son, he who is the true Creator of the universe and the true Lord of the world.

## The Flower Clusters

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Overlaying the Virgin's dress there is a complex floral design containing nine different flower clusters. The triangular shape within each cluster resembles a *tepec* (hill) and its curved stem recalls the Náhuatl hieroglyphic symbol for river. When the Aztecs saw these symbols, they quickly understood that they referred to the *altepetl* (city-state; civilization) because this was how they depicted a city-state in their own hieroglyphic writings. This design has an additional meaning: a heart and its arteries and stems seem to "grow" from the Virgin's sky-blue mantle and spread across her earth-colored tunic. This indicates the divine love that will come from the heavens and encompass the entire earth.

## Her Shoe

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The Virgin's shoe, located in the center of the black moon, has no pigment; rather, it is the color of the tilma itself. The weave of the threads can be clearly seen, indicating that the cloth was not prepared with a primer or other plaster. Cloth of this nature is porous, contains holes, and possesses visible seams, tears and various knotted threads; as such, a primer is needed to hide imperfections and allow color to adhere to the surface of such a rough material. However, as mentioned, the shoe indicates that the cloth of the tilma underwent no such preparation. Instead, the tilma's natural imperfections are used to the best advantage, highlighting and contributing to the beauty of the miraculous image.

## Her Robe

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The salmon-pink robe represents the earth. Not only do the reddish-brown and crimson shadows evoke the colors of the Mexican soil, but the pictographic characters on it also represent mountains and water. The lower part of her robe is folded like the blankets pictured in the ancient manuscripts, or codices, of the Aztec people. Such blankets were given as tributes by the indigenous peoples to their conquerors.

## The Angel

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The little angel is a very important figure. First, the angel's receding hairline, associated with people of advanced years, indicates that the angel possessed the great wisdom and authority associated with elders of the Aztec communities. Second, with its eagle-like wings, it recalls the birth name of St. Juan Diego. Prior to his baptism, Juan Diego was known as *Cuauhtlatoatzin*, "an eagle that speaks precious things." With its right hand, the little angel holds a blue-green mantle that signifies the universe, and with its left hand, it holds a pink robe that signifies the earth. In this way, the angel unites heaven and earth in harmony. For the natives, the colors of the little angel's wings were also symbolic, for blue represented the south, white the west and red the east. Together with the moon's black color, which represented the north, the four colors suggest the four points of the universe.



## The Spilled Acid

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In 1784, more than 200 years after the image appeared on St. Juan Diego's tilma, a silversmith assigned to clean the tilma's frame carelessly spilled his acidic cleaning solution. This should have caused a disastrous hole, but the image was undamaged except for a subtle stain on its right side. The image has also been



exposed to harsh minerals, dampness, holy water, candle wax and smoke, the caresses of the faithful, and even exploding bombs, yet it has remained preserved for centuries.

## Her Hair

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In Aztec society, married women wove their hair into a special braid, pinning it up on the sides of their head. Yet in the image of the tilma, Mary's hair is parted and combed straight down, thus indicating her virginity.

## Her Hands

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Our Lady of Guadalupe is a woman deep in prayer; she clasps her hands together in the European manner of praying. She also prays in the manner and custom of the native people. To them, she appears to be holding the golden flower-heart glyphs within her hands. This strongly parallels the spiritual rituals of the Aztecs: "Our elders used to offer hearts to God so there would be harmony in life," they said. "This woman tells us to put our hearts between her hands, without ripping them out, so that she may present them to God." The position of her foot likewise indicates prayer, for she appears to be moving forward in a dance step used in indigenous prayer dances.



## The Dark Sash

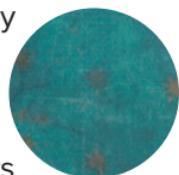
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The sash worn by the woman on the tilma indicates her maternity. The Spanish word for pregnant, "encinta," directly translates to "with ribbon."

## Her Mantle

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The blue-green mantle covering the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe from head to toe indicates that she is an empress, because in the native culture, only the *tlatoani* (he who commands; the emperor) was permitted to wear a mantle of such color. The colors



carry symbolism as well: blue represents the color of the heavenly sky, while green is the color of life. On the mantle are found 46 stars, which correspond to the exact position of the constellations of the winter solstice in the year 1531.

## The Sun's Rays

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Mary's entire figure is surrounded by golden rays that form a *mandorla* (an almond-shaped halo signifying dignity).



The mandorla recalls European images of the Immaculate Conception, and indigenous peoples understood the mandorla to symbolize her power and importance. She must be, they said, "a woman of great importance, more than emperors even, whose power — despite being a woman — is such that she stands in front of the sun, our giver of life, and treads upon the moon, our guide in the fight for the light, and she is dressed in stars, which rule our existence and tell us when to plant, increase or harvest."

## The Black Moon

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The woman stands in the center of a crescent moon, whose dark black color contrasts sharply with the sun behind it. Her position on the moon was one of the most important symbols for the indigenous Mexican people. The word "Mexico" — a combination of the native words *metztli* (moon), *xictli* (navel or center) and *co* (place) — means "the place in the center of the moon." The native people understood Mexico to be the center of the universe and the source of all life. In addition, they associated the sun and the moon with Aztec deities to whom they offered ritual sacrifice. Yet the Virgin of Guadalupe eclipses the bright rays of the sun and darkens the light of the moon. She thus reveals that the child in her womb — prophetically called "the sun of justice" (Mal 3:20) — is stronger than the pagan deities. As the one, true God, he triumphs over everything and radiates his divine, life-giving love throughout the whole universe.

## The Clouds

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For Europeans, the clouds surrounding the Virgin Mother's figure indicated she came from the heavens. For the indigenous peoples, the meaning was even deeper, for mist and clouds symbolized an unknown place. They also saw clouds as visible coffers of hidden heavenly treasures. That the Virgin is among the clouds indicates that she is from a heavenly and yet unknown place, and carries a hidden spiritual treasure. She is the eyes, ears and voice of this precious heavenly being, and through her, He is made visible and heaven is made known.

## The Name “Holy Mary of Guadalupe”

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The Virgin called herself “Holy Mary of Guadalupe,” combining the names “Mary” — a Jewish name that means “she who illuminates” — and “Guadalupe” — a word of Arabic origin that means “the river of black pebbles” or “the bed of the river.” Together, the name can be translated as “the holy riverbed that transports and illuminates.” In taking this name, Mary shows a profound theological truth: she herself is not to be worshipped. Instead, her role is to illuminate: she brings her Son, who is the Living Water and the Light of the World, into the world. In addition, since her name combines words from two cultures frequently at war with one another, it indicates yet another truth: through the intercession of Holy Mary, warring cultures can be united. Therefore, her name is very significant, for through it she reveals her identity and her mission.

Adapted from the text of

*Our Lady of Guadalupe: Mother of the Civilization of Love*

by Msgr. Eduardo Chávez, postulator of St. Juan Diego's cause,  
and Carl A. Anderson, past Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus.









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