



## From A Bishop's Journal (726)

### Our Lady of Guadalupe

**O**n December 12 we are invited to honour the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Guadalupe. The feast had already been celebrated in many dioceses in the Americas, but Pope John Paul II extended it throughout the Americas in 1999 when he proclaimed our Lady of Guadalupe “Patron of the Americas.” We, too, in Canada, are invited to celebrate this special feast. Some people, even, thought it more important to celebrate the Virgin Mary on December 12 rather than on January 1, feast of the Mother of God. Reactions were quick to appear: it is based on Scripture and according to an age-old tradition that we celebrate Mary the Mother of God, as proclaimed by the Council of Nicea, and especially according to the Gospel of Saint Luke, while Our Lady of Guadalupe is based on three private apparitions to Saint Juan Diego.

### What Happened in 1531?

I remember back in 1977 when I first visited Mexico City, our guide had mentioned a very important religious centre at Teotihuacan, in north-east Mexico. The site dated from before Columbus, and there we could find pyramids like in Egypt, temples and palaces that had been constructed three centuries before Christ. One of the tourists laughed at the Mexican guide's faith. With unequalled audacity and faith, the guide retorted: “Sir, it was the faith of our ancestors, and I ask you to respect our beliefs.” When we reached the Basilica in Mexico City, the guide told us the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Needless to say that our heretofore all-knowing and incredulous tourist had nothing out of place to say; he had had his lesson. The Mexicans have a lively faith in Our Lady, especially since the conquest of the Spaniard Hernando Cortez in 1518 and the destruction of the Aztec Empire in 1521 had brought to the people a totally new civilisation. It was then that the famous apparitions to the Native Mexican Juan Diego took place: the Lady called herself Mother of the true God, and gave him instructions for the bishop, to build her a shrine. However, the bishop, upon being informed by the man refused to do anything without first being given a “sign” from the Lady. Juan Diego returned to the Lady, and she asked him to go and gather roses on the hill, even though it was wintertime, and to put them in the hollow of his mantle, his “tilma” a poor quality item of clothing made from cactus plants, and which should have decayed after 20 years. When Juan Diego opened his tilma in the bishop's presence, the bishop found the unexpected roses, and a picture of the Lady imprinted on the cloak. And now, after five centuries, the tilma is still intact, as well as the picture of the Lady, and no one has ever been able to explain how the picture came about. After centuries of scientific analyses, it was discovered that one can see the picture of those who were present at the

time of the apparition, in the Lady's retinas. This piece of clothing of the Native man is very precious, and it is preserved in the new basilica in honour of Mary. These apparitions, recognised by the Church, are like the opening moment of the evangelisation of the Americas: nine million people who had professed for centuries a polytheistic religion and even human sacrifice, were converted to Christianity. Every year an estimated ten million and more pilgrims visit the shrine: this makes it the most popular sanctuary in the world, after St. Peter's in Rome.

## **January 1999**

On January 22, 1999, Pope John Paul II returned to Mexico to present his post-synodal apostolic exhortation on "The Church in America." He ends his long reflection on encountering Christ today and on the new evangelisation, with the ardent prayer: "We thank you, Lord Jesus, because the Gospel of the Father's love, with which you came to save the world, has been proclaimed far and wide in America as a gift of the Holy Spirit that fills us with gladness... Protect your Church and the Successor of Peter, to whom you, Good Shepherd, have entrusted the task of feeding your flock. Grant that the Church in America may flourish and grow richer in the fruits of holiness. Teach us to love your Mother, Mary, as you loved her. Give us strength to proclaim your word with courage in the work of the new evangelization, so that the world may know new hope. Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of America, pray for us!"

## **The Native People among Us**

In preparing this reflection on Our Lady of Guadalupe I could not help but think of the wonderful book, *Saint-Basile, berceau du Madawaska 1792-1992* ("St. Basile, Cradle of the Madawaska, 1792-1992") and the remarkable text written by Mrs. Emma Yvonne Fournier on the Maliseet of the St. Basile Reservation; the Father Henry Béchard's biography of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, and Pope John Paul II's addresses to the Native People of Canada, in 1984, 1987, and 2002. The presence of Maliseet native Mr. Justice Graydon Nicholas at the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' Plenary Meeting, as a delegate of the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council for Reconciliation, Solidarity, and Communion between Native and Non-Native Peoples, reminded me of these words of Pope John Paul II, as recorded in the Report of Activities of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops: "If the Church in America, faithful to the Gospel of Christ, intends on walking the path of solidarity, it must pay special attention to those Native groups which even today are still the object of unfair discrimination. In fact, every attempt at exclusion of Native people must be suppressed."

## **A Priceless Heritage**

Our diocese of Edmundston, probably unique in Canada for its composition, has been marked since its beginning with the Maliseet, Francophone, and Anglophone cultures. We know well about the special care which Pope John Paul II had for the Native People gathered together at Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, September 10, 1984, and at Midland, Ontario, on September 15, 1984. I would like to end this reflection by quoting short excerpts from the Pope's Address at Fort Simpson, September 18, 1984, when he told the Native People that Christ himself had become a Native person, an Inuit, through them, his members. "In you I greet, with esteem and friendship, descendants of the first inhabitants of the land, who have lived here for centuries upon centuries. To greet you is to render

respectful homage to the beginnings of human society in this vast region of North America. To greet you is to recall with reverence God's plan and Providence as they have unfolded in your history and brought you to this day. To greet you in this portion of your land is to evoke the events of human living that have taken place on the scene of God's original creation of majestic nature in these parts."

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