

Virgin of Guadalupe's  
Feast Day falls tomorrow

# Castilian ROSES

## that inspired the Catholic Church

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The world has been impacted by the Covid pandemic. People across the world have faced numerous challenges. In this backdrop many are wondering if Almighty God has distanced himself from mankind. People are seeking divine justice. There was a period like this in history about 500 years ago, when the people of Mexico were afflicted and discriminated because of their skin colour. This narrative is about divine intervention and hope, which is relevant today.

Catholic oral tradition says that Blessed Mary appeared four times to Juan Diego and once more to his uncle, Juan Bernardino. The first apparition occurred on the morning of Saturday, December 9, 1531 (Julian calendar, which is December 19) when it is said that an indigenous Mexican peasant named Juan Diego experienced a vision of a young woman at a place called the Hill of Tepeyac, which later became part of Villa de Guadalupe. According to the accounts, the woman, speaking to Juan Diego in his native Nahuatl language (the language of the Aztecs), identified herself as the Virgin Mary. She was said to have asked for a church to be erected at that site in her honour. Responding to her instructions, Juan Diego then sought the Archbishop of Mexico City, Juan de Zumárraga, to tell him what had happened. The Archbishop did not believe Diego. Later the same day, Juan Diego again saw the young woman (the second apparition), and she asked him to continue insisting.

The next day, Sunday, December 10 (Julian calendar), Juan Diego spoke to the Archbishop the second time. The priest instructed him to return to Tepeyac Hill and to ask the woman for a truly acceptable sign to prove her identity. Later that day, the third apparition occurred when Juan Diego returned to Tepeyac; encountering the same woman, he reported to her the Archbishop's request for a sign, which she promised to provide on the next. By Monday, December 11 (Julian calendar), however, Juan Diego's uncle, Juan Bernardino, became ill, which obligated Juan Diego to attend to him. In the very early hours of Tuesday, December 12 (Julian calendar), Juan Bernardino's condition having deteriorated overnight, Juan Diego journeyed to Tlatelolco to get a Catholic priest to hear Juan Bernardino's confession and help minister to him on his deathbed.

To avoid being delayed by the Virgin Mary and ashamed at having failed to meet her as agreed, Juan Diego chose another route around Tepeyac Hill. To his surprise, the Blessed Virgin intercepted him and asked where he was going (fourth apparition). The stunned Juan Diego explained what had happened and the Blessed Virgin gently chided him for not having made recourse to her. The famous phrase of the Guadalupe apparitions are inscribed above the main entrance to the Basilica of Guadalupe, she asked "No estoy yo aquí que soy tu madre?" ("Am I not here, I who am your mother?").

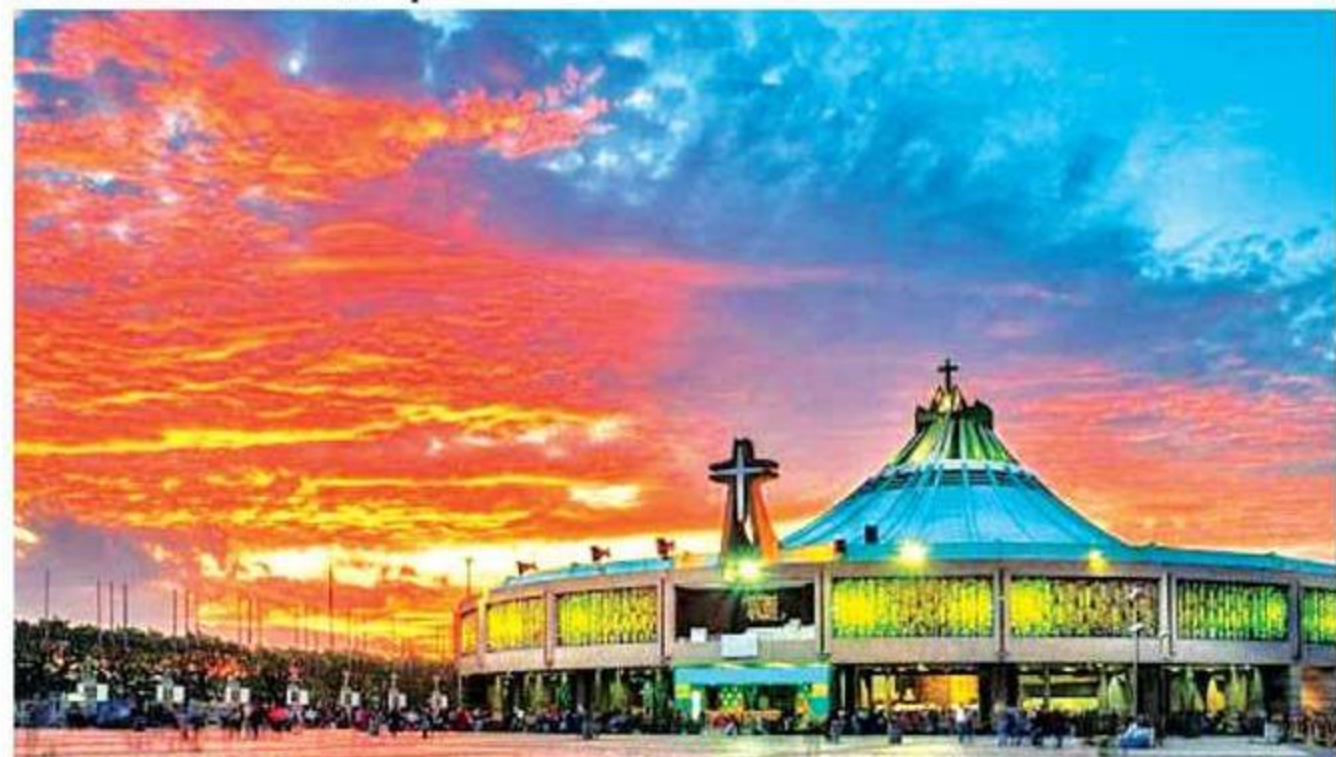
She assured him that Juan Bernardino had now recovered and told him to gather some flowers from the summit of Tepeyac Hill, which was barren in the cold of December. Juan Diego obeyed her instruction and he found Castilian roses, not native to Mexico. The Blessed Virgin arranged the flowers in Juan Diego's *tilma*, (cloak). Later Juan Diego opened his cloak that day before Archbishop Zumárraga, the Castilian roses fell to the floor, revealing on the fabric the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. All present were awed at this manifestation.

The deeper beauty within this story is that the Blessed Virgin chose to appear to her people in their skin colour, as one of them. It was the most pragmatic way to relate to a hurting and discriminated community in 1531. This is how God chooses to befriend us, not from magical silver clouds but in gentle ways that we can understand, God desires to comfort us. Prior to this incident, rooted in their Aztec heritage, these people made blood sacrifices, by even offering children to the sun. After the apparition of the Blessed Mary, they began to accept change. They realised that our Lord Jesus Christ is the only path-way to eternal life.

There was no need for blood sacrifices; Jesus the Lamb of God had paid the price in full on the cross of Calvary. Our Lady of Guadalupe had given her oppressed people a right to dignity and freedom. The Lady of Guadalupe became a core element of Mexican identity. The Blessed Mother continues



Old Basilica of Guadalupe



The new Basilica at sunset



The Mexican flag inside the new Basilica



Candles lit by pilgrims

**Our Lady of Guadalupe, is a Catholic title of Blessed Mary, mother of Jesus associated with a series of five Marian apparitions and a venerated image on a cloak enshrined within the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. The Basilica is the most-visited Catholic shrine in the world, and the world's third most-visited sacred site.**

to inspire her children. During a period of political unrest in November 1921, a man had placed dynamite concealed in flowers at the altar where the cloak of Our Lady of Guadalupe is enshrined. The aim was to destroy this image.

The bomb exploded violently damaging the marble. However, the sacred image was not damaged. This is proof of its miraculous protection.

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on February 8, 1887 and was pontifically crowned on October 12, 1895.

It is one of the few black skinned Madonnas in the world. In 1660, the first chapel to the Virgin of Guadalupe was built on the higher reaches of the Tepeyac hill. This small chapel, which can still be visited today, is known as the Capilla Del Cerrito, and marked the miracle until the first basilica was built in the Blessed Virgin's honour in 1695. This second structure remained the home of Juan Diego's famous *tilma* (cloak) until the 1970s when after centuries of remodelling, and extensive damage caused by the sinking ground beneath the basilica, a new basilica was built to one side of the same plaza.

The New Basilica, as it is called, was built from 1974 till 1976 by Pedro Ramirez Vázquez. The building has seven entryways



The unique Castilian roses



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that represent the seven gates of Celestial Jerusalem referred to in the Holy Bible. On the grounds surrounding this Church are also the remaining buildings of the ex-convent of the Capuchin nuns, as well as a museum about the basilica and various other small chapels. The entire complex is referred to as La Villa Basilica. Today religious imagery of Our Lady of Guadalupe appears in Roman Catholic parishes, especially those with Latin American heritage. Her blue-green mantle colours are rooted in Mexican culture. Throughout the Mexican national history of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Guadalupe name and image have been unifying national symbols.

Each year it is believed that 20 million people visit the Basilica, and nine million of those come for the Virgin of Guadalupe's feast day on December 12. Up to 30 masses a day can be held at the basilica, and pilgrims stand in long lines to join the procession of three moving sidewalks that pass in front of Juan Diego's *tilma*, now protected by bulletproof glass. This moving story of a humble farmer and his divine encounter has unified and enhanced the unity and faith of the global Catholic Church. We can also take a lesson from the beautiful Castilian roses.

As a prudent priest once told me you can keep roses at a wedding or funeral. They will gently release the same beautiful fragrance. Likewise in every situation we face, we must strive to see a positive outcome. We are about to celebrate Christmas and enter into 2022. In whichever country you live, may we as followers of Jesus Christ, trust God for his divine providence and work to build up our nations. May the Blessed Holy Spirit inspire us to be like the Castilian roses, releasing the fragrance of hope and faith to our local community.