

THE QUEEN OF MEXICO AND EMPRESS OF AMERICA

Our Lady of Guadalupe

Possibly by reason of the growth of materialistic ideas and consequent anxiety to buttress one's faith, there is a yearning for visible supports of that faith. Alleged apparitions are eagerly credited and crowds rush to acclaim them before the Church has had time to adjudicate on them; and even when it has ruled against them. Authentic apparitions such as Lourdes or Fatima are by-passed by self-endorsed transactions like Garabandal and Palmar. The devotees of these latter propagate them almost with a ferocity, just as if the Catholic faith was vitally linked up with them. And this in the teeth of the Church's recommendation that we should wait and see.

What is really puzzling is the indifference shown by those devotees towards the established apparitions. Apparently the special ingredient has to be novelty. Novelty outweighs authenticity. However I do not pursue that subject. My remarks have only been preliminary to the discussing of a shrine which—even though it is winning growing attention in America—is insufficiently known to us on this side of the world. Articles on it are few. One does not cross the Atlantic on pilgrimage to it, though the reverse traffic to Lourdes is immense. Yet it is something which stands for one of the greatest supernatural interventions of all time. I am referring to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico.

A Spectacular Intervention

In what way was it historical? Well, it marked the entry of Our Lady into the history of Mexico in a primary way, in such fashion as to alter drastically every aspect of the life of the country. It converted Mexico at a stroke from total paganism to total Christianity, from division to unity, from hate to love. As a phenomenon it merits a place beside such momentous happenings as the conversion of Constantine which took Christianity out of the catacombs and made it the greatest force on earth. Surely then the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe should receive more attention than it does. I discuss with you this subject.

Beginnings of Christianity in New World

I start off by setting the stage for the dramatic happening. The official discoverer of America is Christopher Columbus, a native of Genoa. He awakened the interest of the King of Spain who provided the ships and the men. The journey took 71 days. He landed on San Salvador in the Bahamas on 1 October, 1492. He was then 40 years old.

When those brave explorers landed from their three vessels, of which the flagship was appropriately called Santa Maria, their instinctive procedure was to form a procession headed by a Franciscan priest bearing a crucifix. They marched up the sandy beach; then set the crucifix in the sand and all sang the Te Deum.

This taking possession of the New World in the name of God must have been a deeply moving spectacle. It may be said to have typified the Spanish colonisations. Profane and pious motives mingled. It was said of them that they voyaged for the service of God and also to get rich.

But it is certain that others preceded Columbus to that

continent. The American chronology credits Eric the Red, a Norseman, with having voyaged to southern Greenland in 982, and Leif Eriksen, also Norse, with having reached New England in 1001. But it would appear to be quite certain that St. Brendan the Navigator anticipated them all by about 450 years, first touching at Newfoundland, then like Columbus landing on one of the Bahama Islands, then going on to the site of the modern Miami.

Furthermore, the traditions of Mexico tell of a man of immense stature coming in from the Atlantic about 700 A.D. and preaching to the Toltecs who were the predecessors of the Aztecs, what would appear to have been Christianity. He gave his name as Cuchulain and said he came from the Island of Saints and Scholars. Remnants of his teachings survived for long among the people and later proved to be a big factor in the ready acceptance of Christianity.

The Coming of Cortes

I now come to the immediate prelude to the intervention of Our Lady. In 1519, Cortes, the Spanish Conquistador, landed in Mexico with a small force and by 1521 had completely conquered the country. He found there a real civilisation. The population was about 8 millions of high-type people, ruled by an Emperor and possessing a detailed organisation comprising 38 states and a system of Courts of Justice.

Cortes recognised its grandeur, treated it as a nation, and integrated it into the Holy Roman Empire as an equal partner under the Emperor Charles V.

But its religion was a frightful form of paganism based on the idea of human sacrifice. It is recorded that on the great Aztec days of festival as many as 25,000 persons were offered up to the gods annually.

The conquest of the country was accompanied by the

usual brutality of war. This was accentuated after the departure of Cortes and produced a fierce hatred of the conquerors. This militated against the positive element in Spanish colonisation which aimed at the education, development and Christianisation of the native peoples. This characteristic was shown in the establishment of the Council of the Indies to safeguard the laws set up by the Emperor Charles V. Nothing like this was done by any of the other European colonising nations who reduced the peoples practically to servitude.

Aztecs Remain Impervious to the New Faith

A special characteristic of Spanish colonisation was the effort to Catholicise the people. Priests were introduced in great numbers for that purpose and the result was the evangelisation of the countries. But at first this was rendered almost impossible in Mexico by the resentment of the people. In the ten years after the conquest few converts had been gained, and at the time of the event which I am going to describe it is said that a universal rebellion aimed at the wiping out of the Spanish was on the point of being launched. And it would have to be conceded that at that time the Aztecs were easily capable of killing every European on their soil.

It was a turning-point, a moment of supreme tension when something had to break. The fate of Mexico and perhaps of Spain were in the balance. The issue was decisively settled by the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe. This is what took place.

The Apparition

Thirty-nine years had passed since the landing of Columbus. On 9 December 1531, at that time observed as

the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, a devout Christian Indian named Juan de Diego, aged 57, was on his way to Mass. He and his wife had been baptised by the very first group of missionaries. His wife did not live long afterwards. He was an educated man of the middle class, possessing a fair property. On a hill at Tepeyac, a few miles outside Mexico City, he met a beautiful lady who addressed him in his own language in a pleasing accent typical of the educated people. She identified herself to him as "Holy Mary, Ever Virgin, Mother of the True God". With a complete simplicity he acknowledged her and listened to the commission which she gave him: "Go to the Bishop in Mexico and tell him that I desire a temple to be built here in my honour".

Unquestioningly he went to the house of Bishop Juan de Zummaraga, a Franciscan, gained admittance and delivered his message. You can guess how it was received, but a wrong inference must not be taken from this. The Bishop was a learned and a holy man but tales of apparitions must be viewed critically.

So Juan returned to the hill to see the lady whom he found awaiting him. He reported on his reception and asked that a more credible messenger than he would be appointed.

The Lady simply sent him back to repeat her message. Needless to say, he was regarded as a nuisance and turned away by the Bishop who told him that the lady should either come herself or else give a sign to prove who she was.

Again she was waiting and Juan repeated what the Bishop had said. The lady's rejoinder was that he was to go to the top of the hill, gather the flowers which he would find growing there and bring them to the Bishop. He went to the top which was not only rocky and barren but frozen at the time. He saw a wealth of exquisite roses which he gathered and brought back to the lady. She re-arranged them in his tilma or mantle with her own hands. Then he went to the

Bishop and with difficulty gained admission. He found two other men with the Bishop.

He opened his cloak and the miraculous roses tumbled to the ground. But they seemed to make no impression on the Bishop who threw himself on his knees before the empty cloak which Juan was now holding open. He had reason for his astonishment and his reverence; for on the cloak was imprinted the image of the lady as Juan had seen her on Tepeyac Hill.

The Bishop had asked for a sign and one had been given to him. It was sufficient. The Bishop ordered a chapel to be built at the foot of the hill of Tepeyac to house the miraculous picture. This chapel, made of adobe, 15 feet by 15 feet in size, was constructed in 14 days by the Indians and Spaniards working together in a new-found unity. In the meantime the picture was kept in the Bishop's own chapel and then in the Church.

Dead Man Brought Back to Life

During its solemn transfer to the new chapel, an Indian was accidentally pierced by an arrow and killed. The body was brought before the picture and at once life returned. He was one of those who subsequently devoted his life to helping Juan Diego to explain the picture and to teach the Catechism.

In 1533 a larger chapel was substituted and three years later a still bigger one. In 1709 the great Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe was dedicated. In 1754 the formal approbation of the picture was given by Pope Benedict XIV. Referring to the event which the picture commemorated, the Pope quoted from Psalm 147: "To no other nation has such a favour been done".

Bishop Zummaraga had no doubts as to how the miracle should be utilised. From the first moment he realised Juan

Diego's providential mission and his competence to fulfil it. He gave him complete charge of the shrine. A one-room addition was made to the east wall of the chapel to serve as modest living quarters for Juan and there he passed the rest of his life. His own house and property he gave to his uncle.

Word Spreads and Eight Million Converted

Word of the amazing occurrence began to spread through the country and the Indians in ever-increasing numbers came to see the image and to hear the story. From morning to night Juan repeated its details and explained the Catholic faith. In this gigantic task he was aided by other converts. The results were in keeping with the marvel itself. In seven years the entire population of Mexico, 8 millions, were baptised. The storm-cloud of rebellion was dissipated at a stroke. Understanding and unity between Indians and Spaniards took the place of insane hatred and Mexico set its feet on the way to full nationhood.

And now I specify some overwhelming circumstances which form unquestionable evidence of the authenticity of the picture. The cloak which Juan was wearing and on which the image was imprinted was made of what was called ayate fibre. Only the upper classes wore cotton cloth. Ayate was made from a vegetable called the maguey. Juan's cloak was of two pieces sewn together with soft string. Its colour was white and on this untreated, rough substance the sacred picture was imprinted in brilliant colours. Despite the passage of 450 years, these remain vivid although for the first 116 years it had no glass protection. No, certainly the painting was beyond the capacity of any artist of the time in Mexico, apart altogether from the fact that it would have been impossible to paint on such a surface.

Critics at Work

Of course, as our human way is, the genuineness of the picture had to be put in doubt, just as in the case of the Holy Shroud. So later on it was suggested that the painting was the work of some celebrated artist of the old world. Not a shred of evidence was presented by those who made this suggestion; not even a name was mentioned. It is to be noted that the picture bears no signature, such as is always put on his work by an artist. The tendency to doubt is greater than the tendency to believe. I think it is Saint Jerome who says that the Blood of Our Lord was no sooner vanished from the Hill of Calvary than critics began to question His Humanity and His Death.

But there is much more than this negative proof. Ayate, being a vegetable substance, decays. This process can be rapid according to the degree of wear. Without any use, the material could be expected to last for possibly 25 years. But in this case, after nearly 450 years the fabric is undecayed, strong as it was at its beginning, and the picture undeteriorated in the slightest.

More than that: The experts insist that it would be impossible to paint a picture of its kind upon such a surface. The paint simply would not take. More again, modern examination under a microscope does not show any trace of a paint or sign of the use of a brush. The image is photographic in its nature; a photograph is imprinted without either paint or brush or camera! And this takes place centuries before the art of photography was discovered.

This human tendency to doubt did not cease to assert itself. Every successive scientific discovery was directed towards the picture in the possibility of bringing out inconsistencies. First, the earliest microscope and the modern ultra-powerful developments of it were applied.

Every new ray or chemical process was brought to bear. But, each exacting test, instead of detecting deception, only provided further evidence of authenticity.

Reflection in Each Eye

This most up-to-the-minute research has revealed what is perhaps the most striking feature of all. Inspection of the eyes of the image through a microscope show clearly the reflection, in each of the eyes, of persons in a room. These reflections are as faithful and as natural as they would be in normal eyes, having the same curvature and other characteristics.

It is as if Our Lady were standing in the room and without intervening apparatus is photographed on the cloak, her eyes naturally reflecting the scene before her. Three persons are thus shown, one of them being positively identified as Juan Diego. The others would be two of the following: Bishop Zummaraga, Juan Gonzales and Don Sebastian Y Fuenleal who had just been appointed General Administrator of Mexico.

A Photograph of Our Lady

This raises another point which may have an extreme importance. If this photographic quality really attaches to the eyes of the image on the cloak, why should it be restricted to the eyes? Surely the inference must be drawn that the face is included in the photography? This would mean that it would be the only photograph of Our Lady which exists. All the visionaries of Our Lady have tried to describe her appearance in words, but how far does that carry us? Not far, because words can only convey an impression. A photograph is another thing, especially if it be one taken by Heaven.

Here is another angle to that "photograph". Critical observers say that it depicts Our Lady not as an Indian but as one belonging to the Middle East; or in other words as a Jewess—which is what she was.

One of the notable circumstances connected with the picture has been its preservation from the explosion of a powerful time-bomb concealed in a bouquet of flowers and placed before the picture in the earlier years of this century. This was planned by the persecutors of religion in Mexico who saw the greatness of the power opposed to them by the devotion to the picture. The bomb exploded with shattering effect, producing extensive damage around the Basilica. But the picture itself, including its frame and glass, were left unscathed although a heavy iron Crucifix in front of it on the altar was totally twisted out of shape. Thus the outrage recoiled on its perpetrators, for the greatness of this miracle of preservation served to increase the devotion which those evil men had intended to destroy.

Result: Indians Evangelise Their Own People

There is another significant lesson to be learned from this epic of the original conversion of Mexico. It was initiated and fostered by Our Blessed Lady, but the presentation of the faith was by Juan and his little group of Indian helpers. Our Lady brought them in because they knew the language and because the Indians had no doubts about them; they belonged to the people themselves. One of them was the Indian who had been killed and restored to life during the installation of the picture in the new chapel. He had peremptory reason to give back that life to Our Lady in telling his people about her and her Divine Son. Perhaps the others who similarly helped had been similarly convinced through receiving great favours. Be that as it may, the

conversion of Mexico in seven years depended on that group of apostles at Tepeyac who tirelessly explained the Christian story to the multitudes thronging in daily from all parts of Mexico. They came, they saw, they listened, they were conquered by Jesus and Mary. Then they went to the priests to be received into the Church which up to then they had hated.

Can we not see in that uniquely successful feat of apostleship the very essence of the Legion idea, the mobilisation under the auspices of Mary of the ordinary people in the work of evangelisation. It is the principle of the leaven, proposed to us by none other than Our Saviour Himself, which can be used to permeate the entire mass.

It is an intriguing fact that only one place in the world receives more pilgrims than Guadalupe. Which is it? Lourdes? Fatima? Neither of them. It is Rome. Only the centre of Christendom receives more pilgrims annually than Guadalupe.

A Plea for China

When one contemplates the immediate and wholesale character of the conversion which was wrought by that apparition, one is caused to yearn that some of the great areas of spiritual necessity of today would be made the subject of a kindred phenomenon, say a country like China where live 800 millions of worthy, simple people. If given a portent like that of Guadalupe, these would react as the Aztecs did and would force their way in millions into the Church.

Is there any method by which we can cause Our Blessed Mother to make such a visit? It would be her maternal wish. There must be something lacking from the human side. China is not only the largest community on earth but it is

exposed to atheistic propaganda and is a possible peril to the world. So I repeat: What can we do to bring Our Lady to China?