The Image of Guadalupe
Reflections of a Young Artist

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The artist of the cover image for this issue on “Mary Across Traditions” reflects on the intersection of faith and culture in his representation of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Some studies question the actuality of the Guadalupe story deeming it as Spanish propaganda supporting the conquest and evangelization of the Amerindians. Scholar David Sánchez acknowledges the historical development in the fourteenth century of the use of an image of Mary to assist the Spanish agenda in the Americas and cites Hernán Cortés’s replacement of Aztec deities in temples with Marian images during the conquest, giving Mary the title *la conquistadora* (Sánchez, 15). As *la conquistadora*, Mary became a symbol of forced evangelization with a mission to conquer the religion of the Amerindians.

I contend that the devotion to Guadalupe is complex and remains significant to contemporary devotees such as myself, and I proudly celebrate this in my art, writing, and ritual practice. This “religious devotion with sources rooted in an Iberian past still finds relevance in the present for this immigrant and multigenerational community of Latin@s” (Davis, 46). I do believe that the Blessed Mother appeared to Juan Diego at Tepeyac to show her compassion for the Nahua people. The image of Guadalupe reflects this compassion and is a strong symbol...
Interpretations of the image of Guadalupe are complex and continue to evolve. I created this image by first drawing an outline on a sheet of paper with pencil then photographing the drawing and importing it into my computer where I used photo-editing software to color, detail, and complete the finished piece. As I first drew the outline, I meditated on graces of the image of Guadalupe, mainly compassion and empowerment, and used these in the portrayal of the image. I decided her pose should be the common prayerful stance, standing tall with her hands folded and looking upon her children with eyes of compassion. By exaggerating the movement of her mantle in the air, I aimed to create a sense of elegance and awe. The photo-editing software was greatly useful in creating the pattern of stars on her mantle and creating the sun’s rays. I always liked the imagery depicted in Revelations 12 that is present in the image of Guadalupe clothed in the sun because it is a representation of her divine and auspicious character. Lastly, through digitalizing the image of Guadalupe, her presence is marked and seen in electronic media.

My own interpretation takes into account ethnic, social, and popular contexts, as well as the fluidity in meanings this image has had throughout history. I portray Guadalupe with the symbols from Revelation 12, the crown of twelve stars with the moon under her feet and clothed in the sun. While the version of my work that appears on the cover is monochromatic, the colors I use in my original image of Guadalupe point to my Mexican heritage. The green of her mantle echoes the Mexican flag, the color symbolizing hope because Guadalupe embodies the hopes of many. The pink of her tunic is representative of the joy of grace experienced by those who encounter her image, and when combined with the purple of the background, recalls Advent, a season of hope and preparation. As purple is a sign for royalty, the background establishes Guadalupe as a queenly figure, a manner in which she is commonly regarded by her devotees. Furthermore, as the image of a mother, of Christ, and of a culture, she embraces our ethnic, religious, and cultural heritages. Within the Americas, Guadalupe emerges as an empathetic mother to the Amerindians. In the Nican Mopohua, the second account of the Guadalupe event credited to Lasso de la Vega, Mary shows compassion and caring when she asks for a church to be built and reassures Juan Diego of his uncle’s health by comforting him as a mother (Ruiz, 110). De la Vega felt a strong compulsion to write in Nahuatl, because the Blessed Mother appeared speaking this language and carrying Nahua symbols (Ruiz, 109). His writing suggests the audience for the Nican Mopohua to be the...
Nahua people, and the reconfigured image of Guadalupe becomes, for some, a symbol of Nahua resistance.

As an evangelizer associated with the conquest and as symbol of resistance, Mary of Guadalupe becomes both an image of the tensions between these two peoples and a symbol of their reconciliation. Through her compassion for the indigenous, she becomes a sign of mediation between the Spaniards and the Nahua and emerges as a symbol of *mestizaje*, the mixed heritage that arises from the conquest encounter. She “helped the Nahua culture memory rise from the ashes and destruction of the Conquest” (Suárez Rivero, 242). Like the phoenix, the *mestizo* rises from the ashes of the old, carrying memories of the past but in a new form. Expressed in popular Catholicism, the two parenting religions and cultures bring forth something new yet familiar that bears symbols, beliefs, and rituals from each.

Interpretations of the image of Guadalupe are complex and continue to evolve. Guadalupe in the hearts and minds of Latin@s can be mother, intercessor, and even social justice advocate. Guadalupe and this dynamic faith tradition are models of “religious views of faith mediated through culture” that play primary roles in the lives of Chican@ (Davis, 40). The presence of Guadalupe is uncontainable, and so are the faith experiences professed by those claiming personal and spiritual encounters with this figure.

Many women relate an affinity with Guadalupe as a mother figure. This resonates with their relationships with their own mothers, grandmothers, and children (Torres, 54). While many devotees connect the figure of Mary to the image of Guadalupe, some also realize a difference in interpretation and meaning between the two. For example, for some Chican@s, the dark-skinned figure of Guadalupe, or *La Virgen Morena*, is disconnected from the image of Mary and becomes a symbol of the Mexican and Mexican-American heritage regardless of whether or not they follow the Catholic faith. These Chican@s feel a bond to this image through perceived similarities in facial features and skin color. Guadalupe is a sign of the Mexican American presence in many communities, and this communicates a meaning of “home” (Torres, 62). These connections with “home” and “mother” identify Guadalupe and intensify the experiences of love and compassion felt by devotees. One *guadalupana*, Anita, described her encounter with this icon as “enlightening and empowering and an overwhelming and humbling sense of experiencing Our Lady’s great love” (Torres, 57). (“*Guadalupanas* are an organization of non-clerical leaders that promote devotion to their patroness” [Torres, 51]).
The links between Guadalupe, self-identity, and support of community depicts a worldview that ties human and divine on earth (Torres, 66). Some, like Virgilio Elizondo, have called her the feminine face of God. In her fluidity of realms and all-loving manner, Mary of Guadalupe also assumes elements of a greater divinity as a translator of faith experience and divine presence.

Loyalty to this icon among believers, especially many Mexican Americans, is manifest in numerous venues. Examples of devotional practices displaying the faith of people in Guadalupe include but are not limited to presentation of roses to Guadalupe at quinceañeras as promises of chastity until marriage, celebration of her feast day doce de diciembre (12 December), and altarcitos and niches carved out in homes dedicated to her. “Through Guadalupe, they encounter and experience the God-who-is-for-us as mother, as compassion, as power, as active and intimate presence, and as (re)creative/empowering energy . . . wisdom and understanding” (Espín, 139). The fact that through Guadalupe, devotees experience a “God-who-is-for-us” shows a divergence between the experience and faith of people and the possible original intent of the image and story to serve the agenda of evangelization by the Spaniards.

The impact of Guadalupe has been compared by Virgilio Elizondo to that of Pentecost. He writes in his book Guadalupe: Mother of a New Creation, “The more I try to comprehend the intrinsic force and energy of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego at Tepeyac . . . the more I dare to say that I do not know of any other event since Pentecost that has had such a revolutionary, profound, lasting, far reaching, healing, and liberating impact on Christianity” (ix). Guadalupe, in the eyes of believers, both transcends an image of Mary and becomes a vehicle through which grace is experienced, and through this image Mary is presented and regarded as a maternal figure. Through my art, I wish reverently and humbly to honor Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, Mother and source of hope, grace, and empowerment for my heritage, a Mother that graciously contends with the struggles of inequalities, and a compassionate mother who intercedes on behalf of her children.

References


