

## OPINION

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## Our Lady spoke the peasant's language

**N**EARLY 500 years ago, near present-day Mexico City, an "Indio" peasant was startled by an apparition — the vision of a woman who, speaking his Nahuatl language, identified herself as the Lady of Guadalupe. The woman addressed the man, called Juan Diego, as "my son." She instructed him to bring her message to the archbishop, but he protested, "I am just a back-frame" — a hauler of loads. The woman said, "I have chosen you."

Sure enough, the Spanish bishop refused to believe the peasant. Juan Diego returned to the place, and again the Lady appeared. She instructed him to gather flowers from the hillside. He filled his cloak with petals — a miracle, since it was winter — and went back to the bishop. Now he flung his cloak open, the flowers fell at the bishop's feet, and then, lo and behold, they saw the Lady's dark-skinned image emblazoned on Juan Diego's cloak.

This week, countless people will

venerate that image on the cloak in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, marking Dec. 12 as Guadalupe Day and Dec. 9 as the feast of St. Juan Diego. Our Lady of Guadalupe's cult spread to wherever Spanish is spoken, and now transcends the Roman Catholicism of its origins. The Virgin of Guadalupe may be the most venerated figure in the world.

The question is not what the facts behind her story are, but what its meaning is. I write as an Irish-American, yet observe that Our Lady of Guadalupe is the central image not only of Mexican religion, but of Mexican identity. Often taken as an emblem of the Spanish imposition on native culture, the tradition may better be seen as a symbol of the way indigenous peoples turned the tables on the conquistadors, whose conquest of Mexico in 1521 predated the apparition by only 10 years. That the Christian Mother of God could address a native everyman as "my son," assuming, in effect, the traditional role of the Aztec

mother-goddess, represents a triumphant Mesoamerican adaptation to the unprecedented new condition — a trumping of European dominance every bit as much as the bishop's skepticism was trumped.

Unlike Anglo colonizers to the north, who permanently denigrated native "heathens" and rarely intermingled with them, the Spanish in Mexico were summoned to a mode of cultural mutuality through which distinct legacies would profoundly influence one another. If the Blessed Virgin Mary did not condescend to Aztec, Mayan, and Toltec peoples, who were the Spaniards to do so? Indeed, such mixing generated the mestizo character of Mexican national identity, an ultimate overcoming of the otherwise universal caste system of racist colonialism: the movement from "Indio," "Negro," and "Hispanic," to the inclusive "Latino."

Our Lady of Guadalupe is thus a patroness of pluralistic respect. Her compassion extends to everyone who



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comes to her," as the Harvard scholar David Carrasco told me. "No matter what ethnicity, race, or even religion. She belongs to all."

At a time when language was divisive and decisive, she addressed Juan Diego in his own tongue — and that detail continues to make the point. In North America, the self-aggrandizing religious and cultural assumptions of the founding Anglo settlers were challenged by subsequent waves of New World immigration, but the structure of white,

English-speaking supremacy was never dismantled. Speaking mythically, if the Blessed Mother were to appear in the United States today, she would be expected by the majority to speak English — but would she? She would be expected, equally, to be white-skinned. That majority is shrinking.

Cultural intermingling is a fact of the new American condition, but many are upset by it — especially because Mexicans represent the vanguard of change. Resisting that change — which in the United States boils down to a final defeat of white supremacy — means denigrating Mexicans as mere back-frames, and rejecting their language. This is the subtext of the US Senate's refusal, yet again, to take up comprehensive immigration reform, the long-promised creation of a path to citizenship for so many who already enrich this country. Our Lady of Guadalupe is a world-figure of compassion and openness — an image transcending religion now, but still needed as a shaper of politics.

James Carroll's column appears regularly in the Globe.