

# From Earth Goddess to Virgin ~ The Herstory of the Goddess of the Americas: *Honoring the Aztec Goddess Tonantzin Coatlicue and the Virgin of Guadalupe*

Article compiled by Amalya (Amy Peck) from various on-line sources 12-12-10 [comments in brackets by Amalya]



## Coatlicue ~ Aztec Goddess ~ Lady of the Serpent Skirts

**[From Wikipedia]:** Coatlicue, also known as Teteoinan (also transcribed Teteo Inan), "The Mother of Gods" (Classical Nahuatl: Coahuatlucue Teteō innan), is the Aztec goddess who gave birth to the moon, stars, and Huitzilopochtli, the god of the sun and war. She is also known as Toci (Toci, "our grandmother") and Cihuacoatl (Cihuacohuatl, "the lady of the serpent"), the patron of women who die in childbirth.

The word "Coatlicue" is Nahuatl for "the one with the skirt of serpents". She is referred to variously by the epithets "Mother Goddess of the Earth who gives birth to all celestial things", "Goddess of Fire and Fertility", "Goddess of Life, Death and Rebirth", and "Mother of the Southern Stars".

She is represented as a woman wearing a skirt of writhing snakes and a necklace made of human hearts, hands, and skulls. Her feet and hands are adorned with claws and her breasts are depicted as hanging flaccid from nursing. Her face is formed by two facing serpents (after her head was cut off and the blood spurt forth from her neck in the form of two gigantic serpents), referring to the myth that she was sacrificed during the beginning of the present creation.

Most Aztec artistic representations of this goddess emphasize her deadly side, because Earth, as well as loving mother, is the insatiable monster that consumes everything that lives. She represents the devouring mother, in whom both the womb and the grave exist.

According to Aztec legend, she was once magically impregnated by a ball of feathers that fell on her while she was sweeping a temple, and subsequently gave birth to the gods Quetzalcoatl and Xolotl. Her daughter Coyolxauhqui then rallied Coatlicue's four hundred other children together and goaded them into attacking and decapitating their mother. The instant she was killed, the god Huitzilopochtli suddenly emerged from her womb fully grown and armed for battle. He killed many of his brothers and sisters, including Coyolxauhqui, whose head he cut off and threw into the sky to become the moon. In one variation on this legend, Huitzilopochtli himself is the child conceived in the ball-of-feathers incident and is born just in time to save his mother from harm.

A new article by Cecelia Klein (2008) argues that the famous Coatlicue





statue in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico, and several other complete and fragmentary versions, may actually represent a personified snake skirt. The reference is to one version of the creation of the present Sun. The myth relates that the present Sun began after the gods gathered at Teotihuacan and sacrificed themselves. The best known version states that Tezcatlipca and Nanahuatzin immolated themselves, becoming respectively the moon and the sun. But other versions add a group of female deities to those who sacrificed themselves, including Coatlicue. Afterwards the Aztecs were said to have worshipped the skirts of these women, which came back to life. Coatlicue thus has creative aspects, which may balance the skulls, hearts, hands, and claws that connect her to the earth deity Tlaltecuhctli. The earth both consumes and regenerates life.



## Tonantzin ~ "Our Revered Mother"

[From Wikipedia]: In Aztec mythology and among present-day Nahuas, Tonantzin 'Our Revered Mother' is a general title bestowed upon female deities. Informants of Sahagún, for example, called a frightening goddess of war and childbirth, Cihuacoatl, by this title. The title is particularly believed to refer to Mother Earth, and, among Catholics, nowadays denotes the Virgin Mary.

Goddesses such as "Mother Earth", the "Goddess of Sustenance", "Honored Grandmother", "Snake", "Bringer of Maize" and "Mother of Corn" can all be called Tonantzin. Other indigenous names include Chicomexochitl ("Seven Flowers") and Chalchiuhcihuahatl ("Woman of Precious Stone").

Following the Spanish Conquest in 1519-21 a temple of the mother-goddess Tonantzin at Tepeyac outside Mexico City was destroyed and a chapel dedicated to the Virgin built on the site. Newly converted Indians continued to come from afar to worship there. The object of their worship, however, was equivocal, as they continued to address the Virgin Mary as Tonantzin. [As evidenced in this comment from an early Church historian...]



*"Now that the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe has been built there, they call her Tonantzin too...the term refers..to that ancient Tonantzin and this state of affairs should be remedied, because the proper name of the Mother of God is not Tonantzin, but Dios. It seems to be a satanic device to mask idolatry...and they come from far away to visit that Tonantzin, as much as before; a devotion which is also suspect because there are many churches of Our Lady everywhere and they do not go to them; and they come from faraway lands to this Tonantzin as of old." (Bernardino de Sahagun, Historia general de las cosas de nueva espana I, lib 6)*

## Our Lady of Guadalupe

### Historical Setting: Early 1500's Central Mexico Near current day Mexico City

*The Aztecs were the indigenous "Indians" at the time of the appearance of the Lady of Guadalupe and their language was Nahuatl.*

*[NOTE: The following description of the History of Guadalupe and her time was taken from a website with a Christian point of view: <http://www.maryourmother.net/Guadalupe.html>. Note the footnote references shown below are from this website and relate to that site's documentation, not this article compiled by Amalya.]*



The Aztecs ruled most of Central America in 1500, and their Empire known as Mesoamerica extended from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean and included the lands of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and portions of Honduras and El Salvador. **Montezuma** (or Moctezuma) the Younger, considered the earthly representative of the sun god Huitzilopochtli, became King of the Aztecs in 1503, and ruled from the capital Tenochtitlan and its sister-city Tlatelolco, both situated on an island in Lake Texcoco, the site of modern Mexico City. The inhabitants of the island were called the Mexica.

Montezuma demanded heavy tribute from the surrounding Indian tribes, and was poised to conquer the few remaining regions of the dying Mayan civilization. The city of Tenochtitlan was the center of religious worship for the Aztecs. Since the Mexica believed that the gods required human blood to subsist, the priests sacrificed thousands of living humans a year, generally captured Indians from surrounding tribes, in order to appease the frightful deities.

The Spaniard Hernando Cortes landed on the Gulf shore of Mexico on Good Friday, April 22, 1519. According to one of his men, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, who recorded the events of the expedition, Cortes arrived with 508 soldiers on eleven ships, 100 sailors, 16 horses, a few cannons, crossbows and other pieces of artillery. They named the landing site **Veracruz**, "The True Cross."

Three reasons have been given for the conquest of Mexico by this small but formidable force. The arrival of the Spanish conquistadors with their metal breastplates, snorting horses, loud smoking guns, and vicious dogs proved a frightening spectacle to the Indians. Cortes, through the Indian interpreter Dona Marina, cleverly won over outlying Indian tribes, such as the Tlaxcalans, who resented the heavy tribute demanded by the Aztecs. In addition, the Aztecs and others had no immunity to smallpox brought to American shores by the Europeans, and were decimated in a smallpox epidemic that began in 1520.

Cortes' first action as conqueror was to place the region under the Spanish crown and demolish the temples of sacrifice and build Catholic churches in



*The original Tilma image on display today in the Basilica near Mexico City*



their place, such as the Church Santiago de Tlatelolco on the site of the Temple of the sun god in present-day Mexico City.

In May of 1524, twelve Franciscan missionaries arrived, including Father **Toribio Paredes de Benevente**, who affectionally became known as Motolinia or "poor one" by the natives for his self-sacrificing ways. Many of the others attempted conversion by formal catechetical methods through translators. But they found the natives highly resistant to Christianity, the religion of the Conquistadors, who had killed thousands of Indians, raped their women, and destroyed Tenochtitlan

In 1528 Charles V of Spain sent a group of five administrators known as the First Audience to govern Mexico. The First Audience was headed by Don Nune de Guzman, who quickly proved cruel and ruthless in his treatment of the native population. He forced the native population either to abandon their villages or be reduced to slavery, branded them on the faces, and sold them in exchange for cattle.

To offset the First Audience, Charles V appointed Fray **Juan Zumarraga** as the first Bishop of Mexico City and Protector of the Indians in December of 1528. He accomplished much in his 25 years as Bishop, which included the establishment of the first grammar school, library, printing press, and the first college, Colegio de la Santa Cruz at Tlatelolco. However, he spent much of his first year in Mexico objecting to the ruthless treatment of the Indians by de Guzman, who by then had sold 15,000 Indians into slavery. The First Audience applied strict censorship, and forbade both Indians and Spaniards from bringing complaints to the Bishop. The Bishop countered with stern sermons against their use of military force, torture, and the imprisonment of Indians.

Finally, in 1529, some Indians managed to smuggle a protest to Bishop Zumarraga concerning the heavy taxes and slave conditions in nearby Puebla. Bishop Zumarraga managed to send a message hidden in a crucifix back to Spain, and de Guzman was recalled. A Second Audience was appointed which proved judicial to the Indians, but did not arrive in Mexico until 1531.

However, the Conquistadors and the First Audience had done grave damage to their relationship with the native population. The Indians were fed up with Spanish occupation, and resentment had reached a flash point. Isolated outbreaks of fights with the Spaniards had become inevitable, and Bishop Zumarraga feared a general insurrection. Such was the setting when the event of Tepeyac took place.



[From Wikipedia: under *Huei tlamahuiçoltica*]

*Huei tlamahuiçoltica omonexiti in ilhuicac tlatocaçihuapilli Santa Maria totlaçonantzín Guadalupe in nican huei altepenahuac Mexico itocayocan Tepeyacac (Nahuatl: "By a great miracle appeared the heavenly queen, Saint Mary, our precious mother of Guadalupe, here near the great altepetl of Mexico, at a place called Tepeyacac", generally shortened to Huei tlamahuiçoltica and translated as "The Great Event") is the title of a 36-page tract published in 1649 by Bachelor Luis Laso de la Vega, the vicar of the chapel at Tepeyac, and published the same year in New Spain (now Mexico). It contains an account of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe at Tepeyac.*

*The tract is written almost entirely in Nahuatl and includes the Nican mopohua which contains the story of the apparitions.*

## The Miracle of Tepeyac: The apparitions of The Lady of Guadalupe: December 9th-12th, 1531

[From website: [www.maryourmother.net/Guadalupe.html](http://www.maryourmother.net/Guadalupe.html)]: The following account of the five apparitions in three days is based on the oldest written record of the miracle of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the *Nican Mopohua*, written in *Náhuatl* about 1540 by **Don Antonio Valeriano**, one of the first Aztec Indians educated by the Franciscans at the Bishop's Colegio de la Santa Cruz. An illustration of the apparition event with the signature of Don Antonio Valeriano and the date 1548 was recently uncovered in a private collection in 1995, now referred to as the Codex 1548. The Codex 1548 has been scientifically determined to be genuine, and substantiates the historical basis of the apparition of Guadalupe. [For other opinions about the earliest records of the "Great Event" at Tepeyac see Wikipedia: under *Huei tlamahuiçoltica*]

The tradition of the event is of prime importance. The precipitous conversion of over 8 million Aztec Indians to Catholicism in seven years is highly indicative of the miracle of Guadalupe. It has been pointed out that *great historical movements do not result from non-events.*<sup>9</sup>

The Aztec Indian Cuauhtlatoatzin, which means "the one who speaks like an eagle," was born in 1474. He married a girl named Malitzin, and they lived with an uncle near Lake Texcoco. The three were among the few to be baptized in the early days, most likely by Father Toribio in 1525, and given the names Juan Diego and Maria Lucia, and the uncle Juan Bernardino. Maria Lucia was childless, and died a premature death in 1529.

**Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin** was a widower at age 55, and turned his life to God. It was his custom to attend Mass and catechism lessons at the Church in Tlatelolco. At daybreak, on Saturday, December 9, **1531**, Juan Diego began his journey to Church. As he passed a hill named Tepeyac, on which once stood a temple to the Aztec mother god Tonantzin, he heard songbirds burst into harmony. Music and songbirds presaged something divine for the Aztec. The music stopped as suddenly as it had begun. A beautiful girl with tan complexion and bathed in the golden beams of the sun called him by name in *Náhuatl*, his native language, "Juan Diego!" The girl said: "Dear little son, I love you. I want you to know who I am.

"I am the Virgin Mary, Mother of the one true God, of Him who gives life. He is Lord and Creator of heaven and of earth.

I desire that there be built a temple at this place where I want to manifest Him, make him known, give Him to all people through my love, my compassion, my help, and my protection.

I truly am your merciful Mother, your Mother and the Mother of all who dwell in this land, and of all mankind,

of all those who love me, of those who cry to me, and of those who seek and place their trust in me.

Here I shall listen to their weeping and their sorrows.

I shall take them all to my heart, and I shall cure their many sufferings, afflictions, and sorrows.

So run now to Tenochtitlan and tell the Lord Bishop all that you have seen and heard."

Juan Diego went to the palace of the Franciscan Don Fray Juan de Zumarraga, and after rude treatment by the servants, was granted an audience with the Bishop. The Bishop was cordial but hesitant on the first visit and said that he would consider the request of the Lady and politely invited Juan Diego to come visit again.

Dismayed, Juan returned to the hill and found Mary waiting for him (second apparition). He asked her to send someone more suitable to deliver her message "for I am a nobody."

She said on this second visit, "Listen, little son. There are many I could send. But you are the one I have chosen for this task. So, tomorrow morning, go back to the Bishop. Tell him it is the ever holy Virgin Mary, Mother of God who sends you, and repeat to him my great desire for a church in this place."

So, Sunday morning, December 10, Juan Diego called again on the Bishop for the second time. Again with much difficulty, he was finally granted an audience. The Bishop was surprised to see him and told him to ask for a sign from the Lady.

Juan Diego reported this to the Virgin (third apparition), and she told him to return the following morning for the sign. However, when Juan Diego returned home he found his uncle Juan Bernardino gravely ill. Instead of going back to Tepeyac, he stayed home with his dying uncle on Monday.

Juan Diego woke up early Tuesday morning, December 12th, to bring a priest from the Church of Santiago at Tlatelolco, so that his uncle might receive the last blessing. Juan had to pass Tepeyac hill to get to the priest. Instead of the usual route by the west side of the hill, he went around the east side to avoid the Lady. Guess who descended the hill on the east side to intercept his route!

The Virgin said, "Least of my sons, what is the matter?"

Juan was embarrassed by her presence (fourth apparition). "My Lady, why are you up so early? Are you well? Forgive me. My uncle is dying and desires me to find a priest for the Sacraments. It was no empty promise I made to you yesterday morning. But my uncle fell ill."

Mary said, "My little son. Do not be distressed and afraid.

Am I not here who am your Mother?

Are you not under my shadow and protection?

Am I not the fountain of your joy?

Are you not in the fold of my mantle, in the cradle of my arms?

Your uncle will not die at this time. This very moment his health is restored. There is no reason now for your errand, so you can peacefully attend to mine. Go up to the top of the hill; cut the flowers that are growing there and bring them to me."

Flowers in December? Impossible, thought Juan Diego. But he was obedient, and sure enough found beautiful Castilian roses on the hilltop. As he cut them, he decided the best way to protect them against the cold was to cradle them in his **tilma** - a long, cloth cape worn by the Aztecs, and often looped up as a carryall. He ran back to Mary and she rearranged the roses and tied the lower corners of the tilma behind his neck so that nothing would spill, and said, "You see, little son, this is the sign I am sending to the Bishop. Tell him that now he has his sign, he should build the temple I desire in this place. Do not let anyone but him see what you are carrying. Hold both sides until you are in his presence and tell him how I intercepted you on your way to fetch a priest to give the Last Sacraments to your uncle, how I assured you he was perfectly healed and sent you up to cut these roses, and myself arranged them like this. Remember, little son, that you are my trusted ambassador, and this time the Bishop will believe all that you tell him." This fourth apparition was the last known time Juan Diego ever saw the Virgin Mary.

Juan called for the third time on the Bishop and explained all that had passed. Then Juan put up both hands and untied the corners of crude cloth behind his neck. The looped-up fold of the tilma fell; the flowers he thought were the precious sign tumbled out on the floor.

The Bishop rose from his chair and fell on his knees in adoration before the tilma, as well as everyone else in the room. For on the tilma was the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary just as described by Juan Diego.

While Juan Diego was calling on the Bishop, Juan Bernardino, the dying uncle, suddenly found his room filled with a soft light. A luminous young woman filled with love was standing there and told him he would get well. During this fifth apparition, she told him that she had sent his nephew, Juan Diego, to the Bishop with an image of herself and said, "Call me and call my image **Our Lady of Guadalupe**."

### **About the image on the Tilma:**

The imprint of Mary on the tilma is striking, and the symbolism was primarily directed to Juan Diego and the Aztecs. Mary appears as a beautiful young Indian maiden with a look of love, compassion, and humility, her hands folded in prayer in reference to the Almighty God. Her rose dress, adorned with a jasmine flower, eight petal flowers, and nine heart flowers symbolic to the Aztec culture, is that of an Aztec princess. Her blue mantle symbolized the royalty of the gods, and the blue color symbolized life and unity. The stars on the mantle signified the beginning of a new civilization. La Morenita appeared on the day of the winter solstice, considered the day of the sun's birth; the Vir-

gin's mantle accurately represents the 1531 winter solstice! Mary stands in front of and hides the sun, but the rays of the sun still appear around her, signifying she is greater than the sun god, the greatest of the native divinities, but the rays of the sun still bring light. Twelve rays of the sun surround her face and head. She stands on the moon, supported by an angel with wings like an eagle: to the Aztec, this indicated her superiority to the moon god, the god of night, and her divine, regal nature.

Most important are the black maternity band, a jasmine flower, and a cross that are present in the image. Mary wore a black maternity band, signifying she was with child. At the center of the picture, overlying her womb, is a jasmine flower in the shape of an Indian cross, which is the sign of the Divine and the center of the cosmic order to the Aztec. This symbol indicated that the baby Mary carried within her, Jesus Christ, the Word made Flesh, is Divine and the new center of the universe. On the brooch around her neck was a black Christian cross, indicating she is both a bearer and follower of Christ, the Son of God, our Savior, who died on the Cross to save mankind.

In summary, the image signified Mary bringing her Son Christ to the New World through one of their own!<sup>1-3, 7, 9-11</sup>

[See other scientific reports about the veracity of the image on Wikipedia and other online sources. There appears to be some records that the image was indeed a commissioned painting, and had been painted over several times.]

## The Impact:

The news of the appearance of the Indian mother who left her imprint on the tilma spread like wildfire! Three points were appreciated by the native population. First, the lady was Indian, spoke *Náhuatl*, the Aztec language, and appeared to an Indian, not a Spaniard! Second, Juan Diego explained that she appeared at Tepeyac, the place of Tonantzin, the mother god, sending a clear message that the Virgin Mary was the mother of the true God, and that the Christian religion was to replace the Aztec religion. And third, the Indians, who learned through pictures and symbols in their *culture of the image*, grasped the meaning of the tilma, which revealed the beautiful message of Christianity: the true God sacrificed himself for mankind, instead of the horrendous life they had endured sacrificing humans to appease the frightful gods! It is no wonder that over the next seven years, from 1531 to 1538, eight million natives of Mexico converted to Catholicism!<sup>1-3, 7, 9-11</sup>

[end of website essay from: <http://www.maryourmother.net/Guadalupe.html> ]

Picture of the modern day Basilica of Guadalupe (on left) and the earlier Basilica on right near Mexico City

