



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Our Lady of Guadalupe

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“My children, this month (...) I did a pilgrimage to Torreciudad, barefoot, to honour our Lady. And I went to Fatima, also barefoot, to honour our Lady, in a spirit of penance. Now I’ve come to Mexico to do this novena to our Mother (...). And I think I can say that I even love her as much as the Mexicans do.”

This was how the founder of Opus Dei, St Josemaria, explained the main reason for his first trip to Latin America in May 1970.

Not only a shrine

Guadalupe is not only a shrine visited by nearly thirty million people every year; it embodies the faith of the whole country in union with their *Virgen Morena*, the brown-skinned Virgin.

December 12, the anniversary of one of her apparitions, is a national holiday. From the evening before, people from all over the country, and Mexicans who normally live abroad, wait outside the doors of the Basilica all night in order to be among the first to go in and greet her.

The beginning of a devotion

This devotion goes back to the year 1531. On Saturday December 9, just before dawn, a Mexican Indian was walking by a hill called Tepeyac. Juan Diego was a poor man, a convert to Catholicism, and was on his way to early Mass at the Mission. Suddenly he heard very sweet singing, like a choir of wonderful birds. He looked up towards the top of the hill and saw a shining white cloud in the middle of a rainbow. An inexplicable joy lent wings to his feet and he felt called to go to the hilltop. There he saw a most beautiful Lady, whose presence lit up the prickly-pears, thorns and stones. She spoke to him in Nahuatl, his own Aztec language.

“My son, Juan Diego, whom I love as tenderly as a little child, where are you going?”

“To Mass, my Lady.”

“My son, my beloved son, I am the Ever-Virgin Mary, Mother of the True God, and my desire is for a church to be built to me on this spot, where as the devoted Mother of you and yours, I shall show my loving mercy and the compassion I have for the natives and those who love me and seek me, and all those who ask for my protection and call to me in their troubles and afflictions, and where I will hear their tears and pleas, to bring them consolation and relief. You are to tell the Bishop that I am sending you to ask him to build me a church.”

A sign to prove the apparition.

Juan Diego hurried to the house of Brother Juan de Zumarraga, the first Bishop of Mexico. But his mission met with no success, and he returned crestfallen to tell the Lady so. She encouraged him to persist. The Bishop asked him for a sign to prove that he really had seen an apparition. The Lady told him to return the next morning, and she would give him a sign.

But early next day, Tuesday 12 December, Juan Diego was hurrying sorrowfully to summon a priest for his uncle, Juan Bernardino, who was dying. He did not even go up the hill, as time was short for the dying man. The Lady came to meet him on the lower slopes of the hill, and said: *“My son, let nothing trouble you. Am I, your Mother, not here? Are you not under my protection? Am I not life and health? Are you not in my embrace, and are you not my concern? Do you need anything else? Do not fear for your uncle, for he is now cured.”*

The Virgin asked him, before going to the Bishop’s house, to go up the hill and gather the roses he would find at the top.

A picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe

There were never roses up there in December. But that day Juan Diego found a rose-garden, and he filled the *tilma*, the Indian mantle he was wearing, with the flowers. Soon he came before Bishop, who looked at him in surprise, as he had not expected him to return. When Juan Diego unrolled his mantle, the roses fell to the ground and revealed the picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the mantle which is venerated in Mexico to this day. On the fabric, a traditional Mexican “ayate” made of fibres of the agave plant, in clear colours, is the form of a beautiful Lady with black hair and a serene, olive-skinned face. A rose-coloured tunic covers her from neck to feet, over which she wears a blue-green cloak. Her head is gently bent towards her right, and her eyes are looking down. From

behind her, as though supporting her, shine the rays of the Mexican sun, and an angel with spread wings upholds the gentle weight of the ethereal image.

Painters of the highest standing, including Juan Salguero, Tomas Conrado, Lopez de Avalos and Alonso Zarate, were summoned by the Viceroy, the Marquis of Mancera, and Bishop Zumarraga, to give their opinion of the picture. None of them could identify its texture and quality. The back of the fabric was very rough, coarse-woven material. The side with the picture on felt like silk. The colours and technique remained undimmed by the passing of time.

In the twentieth century the picture was submitted to scientific study, but the mystery only deepened in the light of high-precision technical analysis. Richard Kühn, winner of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, testified that the colouring used for the painting was not composed of mineral, animal or vegetable material. Dr Philip S. Callahan, a NASA scientist, used infra-red rays to determine that the picture had been produced on the fabric directly, without a previous sketch or any brush-strokes. And finally, Dr Jose Aste Tonsmann, a Peruvian specialist in digital imaging, reported on finding minute human figures reflected in the pupils of our Lady's eyes. The figures form a group that can be identified with the scene of Juan Diego showing his *tilma* to Bishop Zumarraga, as related in the sixteenth-century account written in Nahuatl, the *Nican Mopohua*.

Twenty-one years later

St Josemaria's flight landed in Mexico City at about 3 in the morning. **“I have waited for twenty-one years to come to this country,”** he said, referring to the date when his sons in Opus Dei had first come to Mexico. Now God was giving him the chance to see how Opus Dei had been blessed there. As the Father, Don Alvaro del Portillo and Don Javier Echevarria came down the steps from the aeroplane they were warmly welcomed by a group of men who had spent a long time in the country.

When St Josemaria arrived in Mexico, he said: **“When I get into the Villa [the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe], you will need to haul me away with a crane.”**

He said the same to Cardinal Miranda, Archbishop of Mexico City, when he went to visit him. The Cardinal, who had repeatedly invited him to cross the Atlantic and visit Our Lady of Guadalupe, answered: **“Well, I won't be the one to call in the crane!”** He was delighted to welcome the founder of Opus Dei to the country, and gave him a hug, saying: **“At last we managed it! At last we managed it!”**

On Saturday May 16, the Father went to pray before the *Virgen Morena* for the first of nine daily visits. Those who went with him were Don Alvaro del Portillo, Don Javier Echevarria, and three others. They arrived unostentatiously at the Basilica, just after six in the evening. The Father went in quickly, looking like a young man with an important, long-standing date. When he got to the sanctuary he fell on his knees and remained in prayer for a very long time, his eyes fixed on our Lady.

The metallic strokes of a distant clock chimed out. Don Alvaro leaned over to the Father and said: "Father, we've been here for two hours, and we're surrounded by people in Opus Dei..."

While St Josemaria was praying, more and more of his Mexican daughters and sons had arrived. The Basilica was full of people who were praying in union of intentions for all that St Josemaria was laying at our Lady's feet.

On the following days St Josemaria went to a little gallery above the sanctuary, to the right of the picture and extremely close to it. There he spent several hours with our Lady. During the forty days he was to stay in Mexico he saw over twenty thousand people, who came from the United States, Canada, and all over Central and South America. In a get-together someone asked him what to say to people who forgot about our Lady. He replied: "**Have you heard the words of the Lord when to show his love and affection for us, he says: 'Can a mother forget her baby? Even if she did forget, I will not forget the love I have for you.' So we children can't forget our Mother either.**"

Generally speaking, native Central and South Americans are reserved and silent. They may be deeply interested in a conversation but still refrain from taking part. When they were with the Father, however, their behaviour changed: the Mexican Indians from the Amilpas Valley talked and laughed with him, revealing the simplicity and affection of their hearts.

St Josemaria, because he understood the language of their hearts, made his own their human and social problems, arising from the extreme poverty of rural workers. He examined the housing projects that aimed to provide decent homes for them around Montefalco; he asked in detail about the education and training they were receiving in the technical training school there, which was being provided at the cost of huge efforts by many people; he opened his arms and his heart to the families of the trainees at training centres run by people of Opus Dei around Mexico City.

He would say, for example: **"We are concerned to see you improve, and escape from this situation, so that you don't have such great money problems... We are also going to make sure that your children can get a proper education. Between all of us, we can do it, and you'll see how some of them, the ones who are talented and want to study, will get very far (...). And how will we do this? Like we're doing you a favour? No! I told you before: we're all equal."**

A long, friendly and filial conversation

On June 16 he went to Jaltepec, fifty kilometres from Guadalajara, in Jalisco State, to a gathering with priests of Opus Dei working in Mexico and many others who were attending the means of formation offered by the Work. They came from many different places, in the desire to have a long, friendly, filial conversation with the founder of the Work.

He told them: **"I'm very happy to be in Mexico, among other reasons because I've found a healthy anti-clericalism here, the sort I always recommend. Admittedly, you have this as a result of a great persecution of the Church, but, thank God, that's all in the past; I know that you'll always be able to maintain the balanced situation you have now. I didn't come here without letting the civil authorities know (...) and I've had nothing but kindness from them."**

He talked with those priests about the subjects that should fill the hearts of Christ's ministers: their work with souls, their total dedication, their unconditional commitment and constant service.

"Our whole heart is for Christ," he told them, **"and, through Christ, for all souls, without any favourites."**

He spoke to them about humility, a virtue that makes people great in spite of their mistakes; and about the immense vocation to which God had called them from all eternity. He spoke about helping one another and the fraternity by which God's children may be known unmistakably.

"You're not alone," he proclaimed. **"None of us can ever be alone, and still less if we go to Jesus through Mary, because she is a Mother who will never abandon us."**

Time went by quickly in the rapid flow of questions and answers, the Father's cheerfulness and the spontaneous happiness evoked by his presence. The mid-morning sunshine lit up the surroundings, and a gentle mist came down on

the waters of Chapala Lagoon nearby.

On June 22, the day before St Josemaria went back to Rome, he had a get-together with a group of his sons in Opus Dei. One of them started to play a guitar, announcing: **“Father, this is an old pop song. Some people say it’s too sentimental, but I like it. It starts off rather slow:**

‘I want to sing you my sweetest song, for you are my love, the Queen of my heart...’”

The Father stood up suddenly, saying: **“Let’s go to the *Villa* and sing that to our Lady, to serenade her!”**

The consent was unanimous, and by 8.30 that evening they were all in the Basilica of Guadalupe.

Half an hour before, pilgrims had begun to end their visits. But instead of remaining in shadowy silence, the Basilica was now filled full of an enthusiastic congregation. The Mariachi singers arrived with their guitars, and took their places. The Basilica was packed.

The Father came in and the church-wardens closed the doors. Once again, as on the day of his arrival, he knelt down before the picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Then he intoned a Salve, and the singing was taken up by his daughters and sons, all singing together in a spontaneous farewell. St Josemaria was in the sanctuary, surrounded by priests; some whose white hair spoke of long years of work, others very young, and all united in a single love. The guitars broke the silence, and the voices rose in song: “Yours is my heart, my sunshine, my love...”

After that they sang *La Morenita*. It was a deeply moving moment, because part of the very soul of Mexico was there: with the Father were gathered all those who were following the path of faithfulness to Christ that is Opus Dei.

When they began on the third song, the Father got up and went outside the Basilica, to the sound of another song to our Lady: “Thank you, for my having met you!...” It was followed by silence. The nave of the Basilica emptied, and the lights were put out. The cars returned to the city, and a fine, almost imperceptible rain began to fall, as though the sky itself shared in the simple, heartfelt emotion of their good-bye.

Next day St Josemaria took the aeroplane back to Rome. Back in Montefalco, near the old wall of the church, stood some saplings he had planted before

leaving. In years to come they would grow into shady trees and give welcome relief from the heat to passers-by.

Near Jaltepec was a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe giving a flower to Juan Diego, before which St Josemaria had expressed a petition that would remain with it: "That's how I'd like to die: looking at the Blessed Virgin, and with her giving me a flower..." And after a little silence, he repeated: "Yes, I'd like to die in front of this picture, with our Lady giving me a rose."

Adapted from *Tiempo de Caminar*, Ana Sastre, Madrid: Rialp, 1991, pp. 519-525.