



EMBRACE THE YEAR OF MERCY

A Tale of Wonder for the Mary Month of May

Some moments are forever etched in our memories. For me, these include events like the assassination of JFK, the landing on the moon, the election of Pope John Paul II.

On this Mother's Day in the month of May, which the Church dedicates in a special way to Mary, let me add another. It happened when I was in the fourth grade at St. Mary's Cathedral School in Fargo, North Dakota, where the good sisters taught me in the 1960's.

One day, one of the nuns decided to share the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Now, like any nine-year-old of that era, I loved Walt Disney's fairy tales, like Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. But God's tales of wonder – which happen to be true – are infinitely more stunning, as I was about to find out.

Sister told our class of Juan Diego, a humble peasant making his way to Mass one day, passing through the hill country of central Mexico. The year is 1531, and it is the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Suddenly, Juan Diego encounters a beautiful lady bathed in bright light.

“Juanito,” the lady calls out, “where are you going?” After he tells her he is on his way to the church, she smiles and says, “Know for certain, dearest of my sons, that I am the perfect and perpetual Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God, through Whom everything lives.... I earnestly desire a temple be built here for me where I will show Him [God], I will exalt Him and make Him manifest. I will give Him to the people in all my personal love, in my compassion, in my help, in my protection, because I am truly your merciful Mother....”

The lady sends Juan to the bishop with her request for the chapel, but the bishop is understandably skeptical. Juan brings this news back to the lady and protests that he is too unimportant for such a mission. She should send someone of higher standing. She replies that there are many she could have chosen, but she

has chosen him. Back he goes the next day, but the bishop still wonders at such an incredible story and insists he must be given a sign.

Juan Diego meets the beautiful lady at the usual place and gives her this news. Very well, she tells him, come the next morning and she will give him a sign for the bishop. But that evening Juan learns his beloved uncle is deathly sick. He stays with him all the next day, missing his appointment with the lady. The following morning he sets out to get a priest for the last rites and decides to avoid passing the spot of his encounters with Mary, but suddenly she appears before him.

She smiles tenderly and says, “Listen and let it penetrate your heart, my dear little son.... Do not fear any illness or vexation, anxiety or pain. Am I not here who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Are you not in the folds of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Is there anything else you need?” Then she adds, “Do not let the illness of your uncle worry you.... At this very moment he is cured.” And so he was.

As for the sign, Juan is to climb to the top of the hill, gather the flowers he will find there, and bring them back to her. It is December, but to his amazement, Juan finds blooming in the frozen soil the most beautiful Castillian roses. He gathers them in his tilma (his simple cloak), and brings them to the lady. She tells him to bring this sign to the bishop and not to unfold his tilma until he is in the bishop's presence.

After a long wait, Juan Diego at last stands before the bishop and declares that he has brought the requested sign. He unfolds his tilma to reveal the

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DIocese OF LA CROSSE, WI

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impossible roses of winter. As they tumble to the ground the bishop falls to his knees. But his attention is not on the roses. His eyes are fixed in astonishment on the tilma, for it bears the glorious image of the lady from heaven.

Our dear sister brought the story to a close by telling us that the requested chapel was built, the tilma was carried in glorious procession, and the image, full of symbols that show the Blessed Virgin triumphing over the bloodthirsty pagan gods of the Aztecs, led to the abolishing of human sacrifice and the conversion of ten million natives. The miraculous image can still be seen today at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

I was awestruck. Today, each time I call this story to mind, I find myself again a little boy back in the fourth grade, with the same goose bumps and sense of wonder and gratitude to God. And now, these many years later, I live and work in the shadow of the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in La Crosse, with its glorious replica of that miraculous image. Coincidence? I don't think so.

In this month dedicated to Mary, and in this Year of Mercy, may we all take to heart the words of the beautiful Lady bathed in light: "Listen and let it penetrate your heart.... Am I not here who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Are you not in the folds of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms?"

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