

## A Church that Goes Forth: From Mexico City to Tepeyac

It takes about twenty-five minutes to drive from the historic Cathedral in the Zócalo or city plaza of Mexico City to Tepeyac, the modest hilltop where St. Juan Diego encountered Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1531 and where today pilgrims can visit the massive and hypermodern Basilica dedicated to her. At least that's the estimate we got from a cabbie who thought that the absence of traffic due to the national holiday on February 5<sup>th</sup> would make the trip relatively fast. It's the same path that Juan Diego had to follow, walking four and a half miles in the opposite direction, in order to inform the first Archbishop, the Franciscan Juan de Zumárraga, of the presence of the brown-skinned Virgin and the image that was miraculously painted on his *tilma* or indigenous cloak. Zumárraga accepted the evidence of the presence of Guadalupe with great reluctance and never seems to have preached in the adobe shrine that Juan Diego had erected in Tepeyac. I was in Mexico for the installation of a new Archbishop and wondered about Juan Diego's walk as I was being taken in a cab from the Cathedral to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Juan Diego went in the middle of the dry season, but he still must have been worried en route about protecting the sacred image.

On February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Carlos Cardinal Aguiar Retes took possession of the Archdiocese of Mexico City in the Cathedral and then took a caravan of brother bishops with him to Tepeyac. The date was wisely picked by Don Carlos shortly after the Pope's announcement of his appointment in December because it is both a national holiday celebrating Mexican independence and the feast of Felipe de Jesús, the first Mexican martyr and archdiocesan patron. A great deal of anticipation hung in the air. His predecessor, Cardinal Norberto Rivera, was installed twenty-two years earlier, and Mexicans have not experienced a change in their Primate for a long while. More importantly, I think, the date comes in the 186<sup>th</sup> year after the Virgin's

appearance. God willing, 68-year-old Don Carlos will be the Bishop of Mexico for a good part of the preparation for the historic 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In any case, the new Archbishop is already thinking about 2031. Pope Francis in his visit to Mexico in 2016 already signaled the importance of that event for pastoral planning, and the Mexican Episcopal conference took careful note. After taking possession of the archdiocese, Don Carlos and his brother bishops headed to Tepeyac, covering the same ground that Juan Diego traversed. Don Carlos was very aware that he is the thirty-fifth bishop of Mexico City since Zumárraga and also of the relative neglect of the shrine by many of his predecessors. In other words, it was a very long-awaited trip to peripheries.

Before heading to Tepeyac, I waited outside the Cathedral to observe the Cardinal's entrance. Hundreds of cell phones were raised as he approached. Journalists as well as the faithful snapped photos eagerly as he conversed at the outer gate for about five minutes with Miguel Ángel Mancera, Mayor of Mexico City and leader of the Party of the Democratic Revolution. This spot is, significantly, the very point where altar and city plaza intersect. In addition to taking formal possession of the Archdiocese in the Metropolitan Cathedral, he gave a stirring address there aimed largely at civic officials: "The festive dimension of our constitution offers me the opportunity to put into practice, for the good of our society, universal human rights, and especially one of them, freedom of religion or religious liberty, that implies the possibility of mutual collaboration as Churches with all state and private institutions to discover the good of our society." He was welcomed by officials of the state with great fanfare, but many of them also oppose Church teaching. So these words were carefully chosen to promote an open and productive dialogue on many difficult issues. The Cardinal is encouraging a merciful path towards a peaceful resolution of the violent conflicts that divide Mexican society. But he also

highlighted his own roots by birth outside of the “megalopolis” and in the provinces. The provinces, he said, maintain familial and religious practices, particularly among the poor and marginalized, that seem outdated to the leaders in the city. He himself learned to respect and value the centralization of political power, wealth, and especially the means of communication in the city, but he also cautioned the leaders in the city not to lose sight of the religious, ethical, and cultural rootedness of the *campesinos* living outside of Valley of Mexico. The new Primate urged his fellow citizens to undertake a national dialogue in which all voices are heard in the pursuit of the common good of Mexico.

The Basilica in Tepeyac was filled to the brim for the installation Mass. There was cheering and shouts of “Long live Mexico!” upon the arrival of the new Archbishop. I and many others had been waiting for over an hour, and Don Carlos went immediately to pray before the image painted on Juan Diego’s *tilma*. It seemed like he was there for an eternity as the crowd of 10,000 (along with a live feed to Televisa, the Mexican news outlet) waited patiently for the Mass to begin.

His homily moved me more than I expected. We hold a treasure in clay vessels, he said recalling the words of Saint Paul about our hope that our acts of Christ-like self-giving yield a reward of union with God as well as the imitation of divine generosity in our conduct and that of others. He challenged the flock in the same way he challenged civic officials: “Today more than ever before we must go forth from our faith-filled vision of transcendence and conviction of eternity to reconstruct the life-style of our society, giving of ourselves generously and grounding ourselves anew, as the generation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in pastoral and social efforts that we must bring to fruition to leave a humanized and humanizing city for the next generation.” He talked about reciprocal listening and the “synodal” Church or one that walks together with the people.

Evoking the plea for a blessing from the people made in Rome by the newly elected Pope Francis, he begged the people to pray for him and his pastoral efforts. Fittingly, he concluded the sermon with an invitation to the participants assembled before him to stand, direct their gaze to the *tilma* in a bullet-proof glass case behind the altar, and pray a Hail Mary to the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Before offering the final blessing, he concluded the Mass with what at first seemed like hum-drum weekly announcements. One took everyone by surprise. Henceforth, he said, the Archbishop of Mexico City would celebrate Sunday Mass at noon in the Basilica. In the history of thirty-five Archbishops of Mexico City, this has never been the standard practice. Juan Diego, who had to worship there in relative isolation, must have leapt in his grave. The surprise was welcomed not only by the faithful in attendance. Not all Mexicans are Catholic, but all are devoted to Our Lady of Guadalupe. In word and deed, Don Carlos connected with his own people more than anyone could have anticipated.

What lessons, if any, can be drawn from this momentous occasion for the Church in the United States? It is well known that the numbers of Mexicans, not to mention Guadalupans, represents not a small portion of the Catholic Church in the United States. Sixty per cent of Catholics under 18 are Latino. My experience of the installation brought me back to the reality we face here in the U.S. My late colleague Fr. Virgilio Elizondo talked about reclaiming the heritage of a *mestizaje* or shared identity of a mixture of peoples. Fr. Virgil was a Mexican-American pastor from San Antonio and did *not* believe that he was simply reiterating the failed attempt at integration under the banner of *mestizaje* that started with the Mexican Revolution. His borderland vision of integration was one that fought against racism in the United States, defended the cultural, social, and political rights of the migrant, and celebrated religious and

cultural diversity in North American context of religious pluralism. Don Carlos's proclamation of a Mexican theology of the people and the Latino vision of Fr. Virgil are very close even though neither one would confuse the necessarily distinct starting points and pastoral challenges. Being Mexican and being Mexican-American are two different starting points. But Virgil would have loved the Mass at the Basilica of *la Morenita*!

In the homily in the Basilica, Cardinal Aguiar quoted these words that Pope Francis had delivered to him and his fellow bishops during his visit to the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City:

May your gazes, resting as always and uniquely on Christ, be capable of contributing to the unity of his people. May they also favor the reconciliation of differences and the integration of their diversities. May they promote the resolution of locally-generated conflicts (*problemas endógenos*). May they recall the heights to which Mexico can rise if she learns to belong to herself before belonging to others, to help to find shared and sustainable solutions for those most in need. May they inspire the whole nation to not be content with anything less than the highest hopes and aspirations of the Mexican way of dwelling in the world.

The new Primate of Mexico has already knitted together Pope Francis's insistence on going to the peripheries with a profoundly Guadalupan vision of Church reform. His witness and hope for renewal bode well not just for Mexicans but for Catholics spread out around the globe who are eager to be inspired by a breath of fresh air. Aguiar's caravan through the sprawling megalopolis to the shrine at Tepeyac is a symbol of the path that Pope Francis would like to see the whole Church follow.