

## HISTORY VERSUS JUAN DIEGO\*

On April 12 1939, from his place of exile in San Antonio, Texas, José de Jesús Manríquez y Zárate, first bishop of Huejutla, Mexico, wrote a pastoral letter to his priests and people, exhorting them to work for the cause of Juan Diego's beatification.<sup>1</sup> This was the first effective step in the process of canonizing the indigenous peasant who in 1531 is said to have experienced the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The story of these apparitions has been the subject of intense controversy, especially with regard to their historical reality and the existence of Juan Diego.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> José de Jesús Manríquez y Zárate, *Carta pastoral que el Excmo. Y Rvmo. Obispo de Huejutla dirige a sus diocesanos sobre las necesidades de trabajar ahincadamente por la Glorificación de Juan Diego en este mundo*. 12 April 1939. N.p. Lauro López Beltrán, *Orto, cenit y ocaso de Monseñor Manríquez y Zárate, Colección cincuentenario del Movimiento Actual pro Canonización de Juan Diego*, vol. 4 (Mexico City: Editorial Tradición, 1989), pp. 54-55.

<sup>2</sup> The Guadalupe tradition has been the subject of intensive study in recent years. Among the more important works have been Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995); D. A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Xavier Escalada, S.J. *Enciclopedia Guadalupeana*. 4 vols in 2 (Mexico City, 1995); Fidel González Fernández, Eduardo Chávez Sánchez, and José Luis Guerrero Rosado. *El encuentro de la Virgen de Guadalupe y Juan Diego* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1999); Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531-1813*. Trans. Benjamin Keen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Francisco de la Maza, *El guadalupanismo mexicano* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981); Francisco Miranda Godínez, *Dos cultos fundantes: los Remedios y Guadalupe (1521-1649)* (El Colegio de Michoacán, 2001); Richard Nebel, *Santa María Tonantzín: Continuidad y transformación religiosa en México*. Traducción del alemán por el Pbro. Dr. Carlos Warnholtz Bustillos, arcipreste de la Insigne y Nacional Basílica de Guadalupe, con la colaboración de la señora Irma Ochoa de Nebel (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995); Xavier Noguez, *Documentos guadalupanos: Un estudio sobre las fuentes de información tempranas en torno a las mariofanías en el Tepeyac* (Mexico: El Colegio Mexiquense, A.C. Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993); Edmundo O'Gorman, *Destierro de sombras: luz en el origen y culto de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de Tepeyac* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1986).

The procedure for making a saint, known as the cause or process, is a long and complex one.<sup>3</sup> It is initiated at the local level, that is, the place where the proposed saint lived, and can be done by anyone. The first part involves investigations into a candidate's life and writings and evaluations by numerous experts. If successful, this results in beatification, that is, the person is declared to be blessed and so can be the object of public devotion. After a suitable length of time canonization, or the declaration of sainthood, can follow, although not every blessed eventually becomes a saint.

It is difficult to trace the the beatification of Juan Diego, in part because the cast of characters changed notably.<sup>4</sup> In Mexico the same person sometimes occupied different positions. In Rome some of the officials retired or died during the course of the process. As a result I am going to mention only the highlights. A good deal of what follows is based on my personal experience, and it will be quite clear where my sympathies lie. However, I shall try to let the facts speak for themselves. And what you are about to hear is only a small part of the total story. If I may use the most tired and overworked cliché in contemporary English, this is the tip of the iceberg.

Support of the cause came principally from two archbishops of Mexico, Cardinal Ernesto Corripio Ahumada (to 1995) and Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera (since 1995). The process was opened in 1979 and the first stage lasted until 1981. In 1983 Rome issued a *nihil obstat* ("nothing stands in the way"), which meant that the cause could be carried further. In the following year 1984 an archdiocesan tribunal was established that eventually had ninety-eight meetings. The first postulator of the cause was the Mexican priest Enrique Salazar Salazar. A crucial decision was made that the beatification would be based on an immemorial cultus, that is, that a devotion to Juan Diego as a holy person had existed since the sixteenth century. This meant that there would be no need for a miracle or an historical study of his life.

The cause suffered a setback in December 1984 when Monsignor Guillermo Schulenburg Prado, the abbot of the collegiate church of Guadalupe, intervened. Schulenburg's title had nothing to do with monks or monasteries. He was a secular abbot, the title given to the presiding officer of a collegiate, as opposed to a cathedral chapter. Schulenburg forwarded to Rome some observations by Father José Martín Rivera, archivist of the cathe-

<sup>3</sup> On this see Kenneth Woodward, *Making Saints: Canonization, Theology, History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997); William H. Woestman, O.M.I., ed., *Canonization: Theology, History, Process* (Ottawa: Faculty of Canon Law, Saint Paul University, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> A description of this process by one of the participants is Joel Romero Salinas, *Juan Diego: su peregrinar a los altares* (Mexico City: Ediciones Paulinas, 1992).

dral chapter of the archdiocese of Mexico, which pointed out the historical difficulties associated with the figure of Juan Diego. Paramount among these, of course, was the question of whether he had actually existed. The letter caused considerable delay. In 1990, the historical consultors of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints gave their approval for the beatification. It should be noted that all of these consultors came from Roman universities and did not include a single expert on Mexican civil or religious history.

Prior to all this, in 1982, when the image of Guadalupe was being moved from the old basilica to the new, Abbot Schulenburg had it examined by a number of art experts and conservators. Their conclusion was that the image had deteriorated badly and was in need of restoration. Another conclusion was that the picture was a painting, not on vegetable fiber as often asserted, but on canvas. The restoration was carried out in the greatest secrecy. Schulenburg sent a full report to the archbishop of Mexico and later to Rome. No notice was taken of this report nor did it play any role in the procedures that led to the beatification and canonization.

The beatification took place on May 6, 1990, in the basilica of Guadalupe, with Pope John Paul II presiding. At the same ceremony, the pope also beatified the three child martyrs of Tlaxcala and Father José María Yermo y Parres. What actually happened is something of a mystery. Witnesses said that the pope did not say a word in his homily about Juan Diego, yet the text that appeared in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* did contain such references. The *Acta*, however, like the *Congressional Record*, contains the final, official version of events, not what actually happened. Archbishop Corripio Ahumada read the decree of beatification of Juan Diego, which was issued by the Secretary of State, Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, and not by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The decree declared that a liturgical cultus to Juan Diego “as blessed” was granted.<sup>5</sup> A Vatican bureaucrat called it a beatification *en tono menor* (in a minor key). Others called it *aequipolenter*, an equivalent beatification.

Normally canonization would follow on beatification, but only after a prolonged period (formerly this was about twenty-five years) and a miracle. All of this, of course, has changed in recent years. Before the cause gained momentum, however, two events occurred that were to have profound implications for the canonization.

The first of these was the announcement in August 1995 of the discovery of a document that supposedly came from the early sixteenth century and

<sup>5</sup> *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 82, n. 9 (4 Septembris 1990), pp. 853, 855.

verified both the truth of the apparitions and the historical existence of Juan Diego. It was made known by a Spanish Jesuit priest named Xavier Escalada. The document or codex is a piece of deer hide on which is painted a scene of the apparitions together with some inscriptions in the Nahuatl language detailing the apparitions and the death of Juan Diego. At the top is the date 1548. Not unexpectedly it caused a furor. Proponents asserted that it has been put through numerous scientific tests and been shown to be consistent with a sixteenth century native painting. Opponents pointed to numerous anachronisms, especially in the Nahuatl text. Additional considerations were that there was no evidence of the existence of such a document prior to 1995—it simply appeared out of nowhere—and that it seemed too good to be true. This was especially so since Father Escalada was about to publish his *Enciclopedia guadalupana*, which appeared in the following October, a mere two months after the publication of the codex. This document, now known as the Codex 1548 or the Codex Escalada, was to be an important piece of evidence in the canonization of Juan Diego despite serious questions about its authenticity.

The second event was an interview that Schulenburg gave to the winter number of an obscure Catholic journal called *Ixtus*. In it he gave many of the standard interpretations of the meaning of Guadalupe and, in fact, spoke of it very devoutly. However, when pressed by one of the interviewers, he did admit that Juan Diego had no historical existence but was a symbol used by the early missionaries in the evangelization of the indigenous peoples. It also cast a very important light on Schulenburg's attitude toward a possible canonization. "If [the pope] should canonize Juan Diego, then it would be most serious, because in that case theologians would have to study whether the pope can or cannot be in error in a canonization."<sup>6</sup> At first the interview attracted little attention, perhaps because of the limited circulation of the magazine. However, it came to the notice of an Italian journalist, Andrea Tornelli, who wrote an article about it in the Italian journal *Trenta Giorni* (Thirty Days). This in turn was translated into Spanish and appeared in the May 1996 number of the equivalent Mexican journal *Treinta Días*. The article was inflammatory in the extreme. The headline read "For modern ecclesiastics miracles are impossible." Tornelli began by stating that "the abbot rector of the greatest marian sanctuary in America says to the 'enlightened' faithful that the apparition of 1531 is not an historical fact and that the visionary, recently beatified, never existed." The article accused Schulenburg of having for years articulated a theory that the apparitions were the

<sup>6</sup> "El milagro de Guadalupe: entrevista con Guillermo Schulenburg," *Ixtus: Espíritu y Cultura* 3:15 (Winter 1995), p. 33.

result of a syncretism involving the faith of the Spanish missionaries and native religious traditions. Tornelli concluded, “The prelate, then, has no doubts. The visionary is a person of fantasy, the elaboration *a posteriori* of an old tradition. That image of Mary . . . is no more than a fable.”

An uproar followed, and the ensuing controversy was reported in media throughout the world.<sup>7</sup> A taxi driver in Mexico was quoted as saying, “The Virgin of Guadalupe is the patron saint of all America; everyone believes in her and it doesn’t make any difference what the abbot may say; nothing will cause believers to lose their faith. I hope that God will forgive him because the people won’t.”<sup>8</sup> One person commented that in Mexico even the Communists were *guadalupanos*. The *National Catholic Reporter* asserted, “Public outrage flared. Schulenburg was called ‘a traitor to the church,’ crowds shouted ‘Viva Juan Diego,’ and the archbishop of Mexico City said during Mass that the incident ‘has wounded all Mexicans.’”<sup>9</sup>

According to newspaper reports, there was more than religion or historical truth at the bottom of the furor. An editorial in the June 3 issue of *Proceso*, a leading Mexican newsweekly, declared “Our historic banner, the symbol of so many popular causes, the Virgin of Guadalupe, has been imprisoned in the middle of a sordid ecclesiastical struggle for political and economic power.”<sup>10</sup> Enrique Dussel, a well known historian and liberation theologian, was even more blunt. “The Virgin of Guadalupe is being used in a struggle for power. Groups within the hierarchy are pulling from both sides trying to win economic advantage. Neither side cares for the people of Mexico. Neither group is concerned about the true condition of our people. It makes no difference who wins.”<sup>11</sup> The reference was to a political struggle between Schulenburg and the archbishop of Mexico over control of the basilica and its revenues.

On June 2, 1996, the priest Prisciliano Hernández Chávez published an article in *Observador* in Querétaro, in which he called for Schulenburg’s resignation.<sup>12</sup> “The sanest thing for you, señor Abad, for Mexico, and the

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, 21 June 1996; *La Opinión* [Los Angeles], 28 and 29 May 1996, 3, 7 and 26 June 1996; *National Catholic Reporter*, 14 June 1996; *Chicago Tribune*, 6 and 24 June 1996; *Washington Post* (date unknown); *Boston Globe*, 1 June 1996; *The Los Angeles Tidings*, 13 September 1996; *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 7 September 1996; *San José Mercury News* 7 June 1996;

<sup>8</sup> *San José Mercury News*, 7 June 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Bill and Patty Coleman, “Guadalupe Caught in Clerical Struggle,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 14 June 1996.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> No. 47, reprinted in a pamphlet, “¡Qué pena Señor Abad!”, corrected 12 July 1996.

world, would be to request to be relieved of your charge before the archbishop of Mexico and the Holy Father John Paul II do so.” (It should be pointed out that although the abbot of Guadalupe was nominated by the archbishop of Mexico, he was appointed by the pope.) Like so many others Hernández Chávez overstepped the bounds of propriety. “It could be that like Saul you may kiss the ground and be transformed into a Saint Paul . . . although at your eighty years it will be better to prepare yourself with humility for the judgment of God.” He also summarized the assumptions behind so many of the apparitionist arguments. “It is true that it is not a dogma of faith but it is rash to reject a gift of God, especially of this nature, as evident as a flower, as elevated as a star, so much life of our life that without GUADALUPE we would cease to be Mexicans.” In July 1996 Schulenburg resigned, though it was not made public until the following September. With his resignation the office of abbot of Guadalupe came to an end after two hundred and forty-six years of existence.

On November 17, 1997, Schulenburg held a meeting in his office in Mexico City at which several scholars, both priests and laypersons, were present. The concerns that surfaced about the canonization of a person whose existence was doubtful included the following points. First, some held to the tenuous theological position that the pope was infallible when canonizing a saint. Even those who did not accept this theory were concerned over what was a public and authoritative act. Secondly, there was concern that the credibility of the Church was at stake. Thirdly, the focus of the Guadalupe devotion was the Virgin Mary, not Juan Diego. Fourthly, there was concern that the process was moving too rapidly, without a serious consideration of the issues involved. Lastly, there was doubt about the miracle which was being touted as proof for the canonization. More will be said about that later.

It was decided that both a joint and individual letters, voicing these concerns, would be sent to the Secretariat of State with copies to the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints. I sent mine on December 24 and 27, 1997, together with a copy of my book *Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol*. The joint letter was sent in March 1998.

Even before this, in January 1998, the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints appointed an unnamed relator to examine the historical question. In May he gave a report that was highly critical of my book and claimed that its conclusions “lacked all reasonably persuasive proofs, since he frequently made use of the documents with a preconceived thesis and rapid and cate-

gorical judgments.”<sup>13</sup> I was not informed of these criticisms, much less allowed an opportunity to rebut them. All of this was done in secrecy.

Still, the Congregation felt the need for further study and appointed an historical commission to examine the question. The membership was heavily stacked with guadalupanos, and the only member who was an expert in Mexican history was Miguel León Portilla. The results of their labors were incorporated into twenty-four thematic sections which were presented by Father Fidel González Fernández, one of the leading promoters of the cause, in an extraordinary meeting of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saint on October 28, 1998. He first summarized the various positions that had been taken with regard to the apparitions and Juan Diego. He then surveyed the sources under the titles of indigenous, mixed Spanish-indigenous, and Spanish. The most important were the so-called Codex Escalada and the *Nican mopohua*, the first Nahuatl language account of the appearances of Our Lady of Guadalupe, written by the priest Luis Laso de la Vega and published in 1649.<sup>14</sup> González Fernández admitted the lack of any testimonies prior to 1548 (his date for the *Nican mopohua*). As in other studies he presented the native sources uncritically, without noting the questions of dating and authorship that affected so many of them. His final report was unanimously accepted and approved on November 1, 1998. It is quite clear that this historical commission was anything but an objective search for the facts. Yet this meeting came to be regarded among supporters of the canonization as a crucial one for the progress of the cause.

In 1999 there appeared a book that was to play an important role in the canonization and its accompanying controversy. This was *El encuentro de la Virgen de Guadalupe y Juan Diego*, written by three priests: Fidel González Fernández, Eduardo Chávez Sánchez, and José Luis Guerrero Rosado, all of whom were deeply involved in promoting the cause.<sup>15</sup> Of the three authors, only Chávez Sánchez was an historian. Despite a statement by the archbishop of Mexico that he was well known in the archdiocese and the Vatican, his few published works deal with the Church and state in modern

<sup>13</sup> González Fernández, Chávez Sánchez, and Guerrero Rosado *El encuentro*, p. xiii.

<sup>14</sup> “Juan Diego existió: Las Pruebas,” *Zenit* [news service], 19 December 1999. This dispatch contains the full report plus an introduction whose author is not identified. The introduction states that González Fernández was studying the social origins of Juan Diego. “It is not know if he was a noble Indian or a ‘poor’ Indian. It is a question of confusion caused by the translations of the *Nican mopohua* into Castilian.” On the contrary the *Nican mopohua* says nothing of possible noble origins and consistently refers to Juan Diego as a commoner (*macehualli*).

<sup>15</sup> González Fernández, Chávez Sánchez, and Guerrero Rosado, *El encuentro*.

Mexico.<sup>16</sup> References in newspapers and journals indicated that the book had been written at the direction of the Vatican, which was requiring a thorough rebuttal of the anti-apparitionist position. It was actively promoted by apparitionist groups and quickly became quite popular. The book attacked the work of the German theologian Richard Nebel, but reserved most of its ire for the author of this paper. Thus they spoke of Poole's "polemical work" and said that "it starts more from a preconception or a thesis of an ideological character. . . . The page that Stafford Poole devotes to the testimony of Bernal Díaz del Castillo gives us a clear example of how prejudice serves to obscure an historical testimony, denying the evidence of the document. . . . Stafford Poole, under a prejudice, as in his antiguadalupan arguments, seeks to minimize this evidence [of Cervantes de Salazar]." The authors spoke of "the frequent, gratuitous conclusions in his book." Even when this author agreed with them, they implied that it was only because he was impelled against his will by the force of the evidence. "Stafford Poole himself finds himself obliged to recognize the facts."

The authors saw the beatification and canonization as Rome's decision in favor of the historicity of Juan Diego. This was to become a central argument in the controversy. "The Holy See never beatifies or canonizes a symbol but persons, real persons; human beings who faced problems like any man, with capacities and limitations, like any other human being." And again, "the judgment rendered by the Holy See deserves our absolute confidence and on the basis of it one can be sure that the beatification of Juan Diego was totally real, that there was no question of a symbol but of a person as real as any one of us and that his process did not suffer from any irregularity."

In September 1999 the controversy exploded again in the media. On the 27th of that month Schulenburg, Father Carlos Warnholtz (archpriest of the basilica), and Father Esteban Martínez de la Serna (recently retired librarian of the basilica), sent a joint letter to the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, urging a slowdown in the canonization and warning that the Church would be made to look ridiculous by canonizing a non-existent person. Contrary to all ethics, the letter was leaked to the same journalist Andrea Tornelli who was mentioned previously, and again an uproar followed. In an interview with a correspondent for the Los Angeles Spanish

<sup>16</sup> Introduction by Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera, in Eduardo Chávez Sánchez, ed., *La Virgen de Guadalupe y Juan Diego en las informaciones jurídicas de 1666 con facsímil del original*. Con la colaboración de Alfonso Alcalá Alvarado, Raúl Soto Vázquez, José Luis Guerrero Rosado, Peter Gumpel. 2nd edition (Mexico, 2002), unpaginated.



language newspaper *La Opinión*, published on December 3, 1999, Salazar Salazar, by this time the director of the Centro de Estudios Guadalupanos, launched a vitriolic attack against Schulenburg. He accused him of discriminatory ideas because he was disparaging everything Mexican, “He is dumb, stupid, and stubborn, he thinks that anything that comes from Mexicans is useless.” Salazar Salazar claimed that he had told Schulenburg to his face, “You are a perjurer, because when you came to the basilica you promised to defend the devotion to the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and you are a heretic because you are against what the pope is teaching.” He had a rather wide definition of heretic, since Guadalupe has never been defined as an article of faith.

Bishop Onésimo Cepeda Silva of Ecatepec was quoted as asserting, in a statement of breathtaking insensitivity, that the root of the difficulty lay in Schulenburg’s age, with the implication that he must be at least partly senile.<sup>17</sup> “Logically, all older people become a bit erratic and their thinking loses some of its lucidity.” On December 6 Archbishop Rivera Carrera went so far as to declare that in accord with the ordinary magisterium of the Church Schulenburg was excommunicating himself by casting doubt on the *hecho guadalupano*.

In May 2000 I received a copy of a study titled “Breves observaciones sobre la ciencia de la historia y su método con algunas referencias al libro de Stafford Poole C.M. *Our Lady of Guadalupe; The origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797*. Tucson and London, The University Arizona Press, 1995.” Though the copy carried no author’s name, it was the work of Father Alfonso Alcalá Alvarado, a Missionary of the Holy Spirit who taught at the Pontifical University Urbaniana in Rome. The apparent purpose of this critique was to counteract the impact of my book at the Vatican. “The fundamental thesis of the author consists in denying the historical value of the *Nican mopohua*. With this he denies at the same time the historicity of the apparitions of the Virgin Mary, even more than he also rejects the historical value of the tradition. In this way his entire work is marred, and in addition to showing a slanted vision of the documents without giving them the necessary stress that historical methodology demands, he remains trapped in the anti-apparitionist outlines of the argument from silence.” He, of course, was mistaken when he said that the denial of the *Nican mopohua* was my fundamental thesis. He also misunderstood, or deliberately ignored, my fine-tuning of the idea of an argument from silence.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Catholic News Service, 7 December 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, pp. 219-20.

A good part of these observations were devoted to the historical value of the *Nican mopohua*, about which Alcalá Alvarado made the following astounding statement: “Therefore Poole has no recourse but to maintain that the author of the *Nican mopohua* is the bachelor Laso de la Vega . . . falling back on a strange intervention of native helpers skilled in classic Nahuatl who would have corrected Laso’s text. . . . I understand that this is a bright idea of Poole’s. In my ignorance I had never before heard of this idea.” As any historian of colonial Mexico knows, the use of native assistants to help in refining Nahuatl documents was a common practice. Again, we have a judgment pronounced by an historian with no particular expertise in this area. And again I was not informed of these criticisms nor given the opportunity to answer them.

On December 4, 2001, Schulenburg, Warnholtz, and Martínez de la Serna, joined by Father Manuel Olimón Nolasco, professor of history at the Pontifical University of Mexico, sent another letter to the Secretariat of State and to Cardinal Angelo Sodano, reiterating that the Vatican “is committing a grave error because [Juan Diego’s] existence has not been demonstrated. . . . We do not wish to provoke useless scandal, we simply wish to avoid diminishing the Church’s credibility.”<sup>19</sup> Again, a letter that should have remained confidential was leaked to the press, to the same Andrea Tornelli who had published the letter of September 27, 1999. According to an interview that Tornelli gave to *Reforma*, the most recent letter caused “not a little commotion.” Tornelli predicted that it would have no result, because the decision had already been made, and all that remained was for a date for the canonization to be fixed. He claimed that the signatories brought forth no new information to substantiate their claims, and he cited a lengthy essay by González Fernández in the *Osservatore Romano* (December 20, 2001). In that essay González cited the Codex Escalada as proof of Juan Diego’s existence. Tornelli said that the Holy See had approved the canonization only after the most rigorous historical examination, an assertion that is difficult to accept at face value. Tornelli’s interviewer, however, added, “It must be said, nevertheless, that the promulgation of the canonization of Juan Diego, like that of the founder of Opus Dei, José María Escrivá de Balaguer, has caused a bit of unease in certain ecclesiastical circles that for some years have hoped for the beatification of Monsignor Romero, archbishop of San Salvador, assassinated on the 24 of March 1980.”

On December 20 the pope signed a decree recognizing a miracle that opened the way for the canonization some time in 2002. There are at least

<sup>19</sup> *Reforma*, date unknown.

three different versions of this miracle. The stories agree on the fact that a young drug addict named Juan José Barragán Silva attempted suicide and was miraculously cured through the intercession of Juan Diego. The evidence for the miracle is questionable. The physician who authenticated it, Dr. Juan Homero Hernández Illescas, was a witness in the archdiocesan tribunal for Juan Diego's beatification in 1984, when he was described as a physician, university professor, and expert on the stars on the Virgin's robe. He is currently a member of the Centro de Estudios Guadalupanos in Mexico City.

On February 26, 2002, the cardinals of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints met and approved the canonization of Juan Diego, setting July 30 in Mexico as the time and place. The canonization produced scenes of great enthusiasm, with an estimated 8 million people lining the streets to cheer the pope. One person, however, was conspicuous by his absence. Juan José Barragán Silva, whose cure provided the miracle, was not present. One would have expected him to be in the front rows or to be one of those who offered gifts to the pope. The last that was heard of him was that he had migrated to California and was working in a restaurant in Anaheim.<sup>20</sup> At the present time his whereabouts are unknown.

#### CONCLUSIONS

From the beginning the move to beatify and canonize Juan Diego was carried out under the initiative and direction of the hierarchy of Mexico. Although the people of Mexico responded with enthusiasm, this move did not arise spontaneously from their popular devotion. It is not going too far to say that the entire process was manipulated and that motives of ecclesiastical politics lay behind it.

The proponents of the cause reflected the extremes of nineteenth and twentieth-century ultramontanist, especially in their appeal to papal infallibility. For them papal authority was sufficient compensation for the lack of historical evidence. Similarly there has been a tendency, dating back to the nineteenth century, to raise Guadalupe to the status of a dogma. Apparitionists find themselves in the awkward position of denying it a status as a doctrine of faith, yet at the same time moving it toward that status. On January 21, 2002 José Luis Guerrero Rosado was interviewed on the radio and declared that "if [Schulenburg] insists on denying the dogma of Juan Diego he could be excommunicated because he would be doubting God himself." Later he said

<sup>20</sup> *Reforma*, January 2002.

that it was possible to deny Juan Diego's existence prior to July 30 but not afterward. To deny it after the canonization was to go against papal teaching.<sup>21</sup>

The canonization of Juan Diego reveals serious flaws in the process followed by the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints and the non-historical attitudes of those who were supposed to be studying an historical event. For one thing the move to canonization was carried out with undue haste. From the beginning the process was under the control of its sponsors and advocates, with the Congregation playing a reactive role. At no time were opponents of the process invited to join in the proceedings nor were their opinions sought. None of the persons who led the cause were historians or had historical training. All the historians who were consulted by the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints were from Roman universities. The consultants were willing to accept the most dubious evidence, with special reliance on the Codex Escalada and incorrect dating and authorship for the *Nican mopohua*. Finally, there is the fact that the 1982 report on the image which showed it to be a work of human hands that had not been miraculously preserved over the centuries was totally ignored.

The entire process was carried out in secrecy. Why was such secrecy necessary? There seemed nothing in the process that warranted this. Those who opposed the process had no recourse but to send private letters to the Vatican, letters that were rarely if ever acknowledged. It would seem that the natural and reasonable way to proceed in a matter of such delicacy would be to gather the advocates of both sides in a forum in which each could present its case. After that the Congregation could make its decision. I myself urged this step on Rome, but nothing was ever done.

The two incidents of leaking of confidential correspondence to the press were gross violations of proper procedure. Every Catholic, and non-Catholic for that matter, has the right to communicate with Rome about matters of concern with the expectation of privacy. That this did not happen reflects badly on the integrity of those responsible. There was reliance on a highly dubious miracle. The doctor involved could certainly be accused of conflict of interest.

The wider question is that of the Church's attitude toward history and the freedom of historians to pursue their investigations without having to fear ecclesiastical intervention or personal attacks and recriminations. Must historians bow to the "ordinary magisterium" and not pursue studies that upset traditional devotions? Are Guadalupe and Juan Diego "salvific acts" that are not subject to judgment by historical criteria?

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Marcela Turati, *Grupo Reforma*, 29 June 2002.

Whatever the answers, in the canonization of Juan Diego we have another sign that leaders of the institutional Church are still not comfortable with scientific history. Evidence was ignored or disdained, and history has been made subservient to popular devotion and the agendas of the Mexican hierarchy. The entire process has been marred by dishonesty and manipulation. The lamentable fact is that many contemporary theologians are dismissive of history. There are those who would remove Guadalupe from any historical consideration whatever. For these theologians there are different levels of truth, with theological truth at the top and historical truth relegated to some sub-basement. For them, as for some anthropologists, the important thing is not what happened but what people believe happened and the effect that such belief has on their devotion or behavior. According to the feminist theologian Jeannette Rodriguez, "The question as to whether the apparitions did in fact occur is inconsequential."<sup>22</sup> The German lay theologian Richard Nebel, declared "What we do want to do is to emphasize as a notable fact that the veneration of this image has inspired a cultus of such great scope as is the cultus of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Mexico, and therefore the question of whether the image was created by human hands or is of divine origin is totally irrelevant." He went on to say:

Whatever may be the results of the attempts to prove or to establish faith in the *Nican mopohua*, it would be absolutely inevitable to renounce any historical evidence. Faith in the guadalupan event could gain much and lose nothing with such a renunciation: in the historical sense the narrative in the *Nican mopohua* could be incorrect in some points and yet faith would not be diminished; but not because it may be based on universal rational truths, but because the historical proof does not affect faith. To accept the religious faith in the guadalupan event is not an act of knowing; no "rational" bases accompany it. . . . For this reason, when the anti-apparitionists demand foundations and the apparitionists make efforts to give them, both do equal violence to the religious character of the belief. Their controversy, then, is a sham battle that bypasses their true difference. This consists not so much in the fact that some believe something determined and the others in the opposite but rather that it is at the point where, while some believe something, the others for the most part believe not in something different, but in nothing at all.<sup>23</sup>

David Brading observed "For Nebel, the truths of theology soared far above any concern with mere historicity."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Jeannette Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 127.

<sup>23</sup> Nebel, *Santa María Tonantzín*, pp. 126-27, 240-41.

<sup>24</sup> Brading, *Mexican Phoenix*, p. 345.

The nineteenth century Jesuit Esteban Antícoli asserted that Guadalupe was not subject to historical judgment because it was an intrinsically supernatural or miraculous event.<sup>25</sup> During the controversy over the canonization of Juan Diego some clerics made a similar assertion, saying that it was a “salvific event.” The Jesuit Allan Figueroa Deck, in a review of my book on Guadalupe, wrote that “for Catholics of the Americas, for whom this devotion is paramount, no ultimately satisfactory assessment of the Guadalupe phenomenon can be made outside the framework of faith.”<sup>26</sup> Brading in a recent and highly praised work makes the assertion, odd for an historian, that the current controversy “derives from a nineteenth-century concern with ‘historicity’ and is animated on both sides of the debate by a latter-day positivism which impels apparitionists to insist on ‘the Guadalupan Fact’, and their opponents to hint at forgery and condemn error.”<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, Brading appears to side with those who would divorce theology from history and thus would take theology into the realm of the subjective.

Another reviewer of my book took an even stronger position.

Part of the trouble begins with a methodological position staked out in the introduction. Poole contends that the appropriate interpretation of Guadalupe as a symbol is dependent on whether [sic] the apparition accounts report factual events or whether they are ‘legend and pious inventions.’ Absurdity. . . . No historian could ever prove conclusively that the woman was in fact Mary, nor is history equipped to evaluate the ‘reality’ claims of such a vision. Poole would be on safer ground to limit the scope of his work to ascertaining the cultural-historical contexts in which the principal elements of the tradition are developed. For instance, it would be a tremendous help to have a clear understanding of whether the apparition account is primarily a product of 16th century indigenous oral tradition or whether it is the invention of mid-17th century *criollo* nature. . . . one is left with the impression that Poole is unequipped to take an oral tradition seriously. He seems to be bewitched by the maxim, ‘If it isn’t written down, it never happened,’ or at least, ‘Whoever writes it down first is the author.’<sup>28</sup>

Can Guadalupe be judged merely as an historical fact apart from any religious or national significance that it may have? I believe that it can. There is no law that exempts it from examination as an historical phenomenon. It is

<sup>25</sup> [Esteban Antícoli, S.J.] *Defensa de la aparición de la Virgen María en el Tepeyac, escrita por un sacerdote de la Compañía de Jesús contra un libro impreso en México el año de 1891* (Puebla: Imprenta del Colegio Pio de Artes y oficios, 1893), p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> *America*, 30 September 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Brading, *Mexican Phoenix*, p. 361.

<sup>28</sup> *Anthropos Institut*, 92 (1997), unpaginated.

precisely the failure to take into consideration the historical reality of Guadalupe that has warped so many interpretations of it and rendered them useless. Once the link with the historical foundation is severed and Guadalupe is removed from empirical investigation, then people are free to spin the most outlandish theories and manufacture extravagant and fanciful interpretations without having to prove them. That is precisely what has happened with Guadalupe and Juan Diego during the past twenty to thirty years, especially during the course of the recent canonization. It has been asserted that he was a Chichimeca (that is, a member of one of the nomadic and semi-barbarous tribes to the north of Mexico City), a leader (*principal*) of his village, that he was descended from the royal house of Texcoco, that he had had two wives before his conversion, that he had fought against the Spaniards, that he was a poet and philosopher, and that his numerous descendants live in Mexico today.<sup>29</sup> The claim has also been made that it was his high-born status that gave his message credence among the Indians. There is no evidence for any of these assertions, which seem to have been made up out of whole cloth. Further, they miss the central point of all apparition stories, that Mary comes to the poor, the helpless, the marginalized in society. She is their special defender. In the *Nican mopohua* Juan Diego asks “I greatly implore you, my patron, noble Lady, my daughter, entrust one of the high nobles, who are recognized, respected and honored, to carry and take your message so that he will be believed.” The Virgin responds, “Be assured that my servants and messengers to whom I entrust it to carry my message and realize my wishes are not high ranking people. Further it is highly necessary that you yourself be involved and take care of it. It is very much by your hand that my will and wish are to be carried out and accomplished.”<sup>30</sup>

The problem is not just a Catholic or ecclesiastical one. These are symptoms of a wider difficulty. In her book *Not Out of Africa*, Mary Lefkowitz speaks of those for whom history is some kind of fictive arrangement that can be used to advance the interests of special groups. “There is a current tendency, at least among academics, to regard history as a form of fiction that can and should be written differently by each nation or ethnic group. The assumption seems to be that somehow all versions will simultaneously be true, even if they conflict in particular details.”<sup>31</sup> Recently at a major university I attended a conference of academics, predominantly non-Catholic,

<sup>29</sup> *Positio* for beatification, 1989; Luis Guerrero Rosado, *El Nican Mopohua: un intento de exégesis*, 102; Princeofeden website.

<sup>30</sup> Sousa, Lockhart, Poole, *The Story of Guadalupe*, pp. 68-70, 69-71.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), p. xiv.

where this same disregard for historical moorings was manifested. There was an exaltation of intuition over intellect, and a deep-seated subjectivism that saw people's beliefs as the most important thing, whether based on historical reality or not. An icon, it was asserted, is an icon only when there is someone to believe in it. And there was the same old assertion that the miraculous is not subject to historical inquiry. After my own presentation one person challenged my statement that a so-called miracle can be subject to scientific or historical analysis. How then, I asked him, do you know it is a miracle? Because, he replied, I believe it.

A recent work, submitted to the American Historical Association for prize consideration, stated it this way. "However, proper or traditional history, as a style of writing, is merely an ideological defense of a particularly narrow-minded professional code, for it is just as politically positioned as any other: history is always for someone. The idea of writing an objective, neutral, disinterested text, where explaining and describing something is done from a position that ostensibly isn't a position at all, is a naive one. For all these reasons, metanarrative and traditional histories are both myopic and moribund."<sup>32</sup> "The past as history always has been and always will be necessarily configured, troped, emplotted, read, mythologized, and ideologized in ways to suit ourselves."<sup>33</sup> "The criteria of truth and falsity do not apply to historical representations."<sup>34</sup>

Attitudes like these are challenges to our professionalism. It is my belief and deep-seated feeling that we must defend our professional standards and the role of our discipline, whatever its failings, in searching for historical truth. In this the controversy over Juan Diego and history can serve as both a guide and a warning.

STAFFORD POOLE, C.M.

<sup>32</sup> Federico Garza Carvajal, *Butterflies Will Burn: Prosecuting Sodomites in Early Modern Spain and Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), pp. 3-4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.