

La Virgen Del Tepeyac – A Sign of our Times

Some years ago Jane and I visited San Juan Bautista to attend the Teatro Campesino's production of *La Virgen del Tepeyac* – a dramatization of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The play is a creation of Luis Valdez. The stage was the whole interior of the old mission church. A rearrangement of the pews allowed for the center of the nave to serve as the focus of the action – which nevertheless ranged from the back of the mission to its ornate sanctuary up front. Jane and I had seats right next to the raised platform in the center.

There must have been a cast of at least a hundred people young and old and the drama started with a bang! Warriors, priestesses and children came pouring down the center aisle from the back to the beat of drums and the sound of the conch shell – to perform a vigorous dance in honor of the Estrella del Oriente (which I assume was the rising sun). The costumes, the feathered headdress made of all the colors of the rainbow, the percussion, the entranced faces of the singers and dancers! My chin dropped. If this was an example of Aztec culture, how much the poorer we are for its disappearance!

The dancers then proceeded to the front of the church to continue their worship under the leadership of a matronly priestess dressed in blue. And then came a messenger down the center aisle announcing strange news – which abruptly stopped the Aztec ritual and filled the church with a moment of ominous silence. From the rear of the church came the haunting strains of Gregorian chant. We turned around to see two white sails, each with a red cross – and down the center aisle strode the conquistadors in armor and friars in their brown robes and a bishop. Some of the Aztecs took flight, others were caught and baptized, among them Cuahtlatoczin, now to be named Juan Diego.

Then came the vision. As he makes his way to the center platform, Juan Diego looks up with amazement – and there in the choir loft, high above us all, is the Virgin of Guadalupe, the actress a perfect choice, the lighting sublime, her garb so colorful. Nor is she as silent as a statue. She smiles; she's talkative, she gestures – and she's an Indian. Well you know the story. Juan goes to the Bishop to request a church on the site. The friars comically argue. More visions follow from the sides and front of the church – one in which the Virgin is surrounded by a celestial court of Aztec angels and another in which there's a lovely musical dialogue between Juan and the Virgin. There's also a scene in which Juan Diego can no more convince his Aztec friends than the friars. And of course there is the Bishop's demand for a sign of Castilian roses and a grand finale in the sanctuary of the church where Juan Diego arrives amid of crowd of Christians and Aztecs, the mitred bishop and the blue clad Indian priestess – and Juan ascends the altar, turns around, opens his cloak and out fall the roses, revealing a perfect image of the Virgin woven into the fabric of the cloak. And all shout: "Oh!" The show ends with a procession of Aztecs, friars (carrying the roses in their arms), the Bishop side by side with the Aztec priestess and finally Juan Diego displaying his cloak.

I must say that show made a true believer out of me – more so than any abstract analysis of the legend. It also left me wondering: did the Virgin appear to convert the Aztecs to Christianity or the friars to an appreciation of the Aztecs and their culture? The way Luis Valdez designs the show with an equally impressive display of native American and Christian religion, the Virgin seems to appeal to the unity that binds us all rather than the diversity we too often manipulate to keep us apart.

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