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“Passed from Hand to Hand”: Marian Imagery During Times of Conversion

by

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## **An Introduction to Mary**

The Mother of God has been an important and popular figure in Christianity since its formations in the first few centuries CE. But the Virgin Mary was not always known as the Mother of God, or even as the Queen of Heaven. Her role in the early Church was fluid, matching the changing theological attitudes. Mary continued to adapt to fill the needs of the Church and its worshippers well into the sixteenth century at the time of European colonialism.

The Virgin has been used by both the early Church and the Church under Spanish colonial rule to appeal to the local populations who had not yet (or only very recently) been converted to Christianity. As a mother figure, the agent of salvation and forgiveness, Mary embodied a sense of nurturing and peace that allowed her to be easily adapted to maternal imagery. While her role has changed as her image has in a sense been “passed from hand to hand” through the centuries, Mary has continued to serve the Church in whatever capacity, religious or political, it requires.<sup>1</sup> Examining Marian imagery during times of conversion, then, provides an interesting insight into what the Church demanded, both during the conversion process and from its new citizens.

### **Mary in the Early Roman Church: Influences, Images, and Uses**

#### The Early Christian Church

In the centuries after Christ’s death, Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire in various forms, the young Church struggling to define itself, its followers, and its teachings, and to separate those definitions from the theologies already existing in the Empire. Until halfway through the third century, Rome hadn’t seen the new, growing religion as a threat. This changed in 249 under Emperor Decius who, in an attempt to rally the Empire, ordered every citizen to

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology* (The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2004), 70.

“demonstrate his or her loyalty by performing public sacrifices.”<sup>2</sup> After this demonstration, citizens would receive a certificate as proof of their allegiance to Rome. Christian citizens who refused faced anything from loss of property or incarceration to execution. A brief respite came in 251 with Decius’s death, but was soon followed by one of Diocletian’s attempts to revitalize the Empire, the Great Persecution in 284. Under Diocletian, Christian worship was banned, churches were torn down, and Bibles and other religious artifacts were confiscated. Clearly, by the end of the third century, the new religion was threatening enough (or had enough appearance of being a threat) to warrant imperial action against it. In fact, by the turn of the century Christianity had spread throughout the entire Roman Empire, even finding followers in the more remote locations of modern-day England and India.<sup>3</sup>

Another aspect of Diocletian’s revitalization program was the division of the Empire into East and West halves and the creation of the tetrarchy who ruled the entire Empire. The new system worked until Diocletian’s abdication in 305, and the four tetrarchs became rivals for control of the Empire. One of those contenders for the tetrarchy was Constantine, who in 306 replaced his father as one of the Western tetrarchs. In 312 before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine famously claimed to see a vision of a cross of light in the sky with the words, “By this conquer.”<sup>4</sup> Constantine carried the image of the cross into battle and defeated his rival Western tetrarch, making him the Emperor of the entire Western Empire. One year later Constantine and the Emperor of the Eastern Empire, Licinius, delivered the Edict of Milan,

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Mullin, *A Short World History of Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Nicholson, “Constantine’s Vision of the Cross,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 54, no. 3 (2000): 310.

guaranteeing freedom of religion in the Roman Empire. Influenced by his vision, Constantine established Christianity as the official imperial religion of Rome. The once-persecuted religion now had state protection and funding. Christian influence spread further in 324 when Constantine invaded Licinius's Empire and, after defeating his rival, established Constantinople and settled the new Empire in the East, bringing Christianity with him. The religion continued to gain influence and support until Emperor Theodosius in 380 required all Roman citizens to be Christians. The Church was now for the first time an imperial power in the world, and therefore had the responsibility of establishing its new regime. Not even four hundred years old and still discovering and creating its own doctrine, Christianity now had to provide a standard worship and guidelines for its followers.

#### Mary in the Early Church

The early (Apostolic) Church focused more on the resurrection of Christ rather than his birth, and so Mary wasn't granted much serious study. As the focus of the Church turned more to Christ's birth and the issue of what sort of being (divine or man) he actually was, the subject of Mary's role and divinity became a pressing issue. If Christ was simply a man "upon whom the Holy Spirit descended,"<sup>5</sup> then Mary was no more than a woman who gave birth to a man (a woman clearly favored by God, but a mortal woman nonetheless). But if Christ was indeed God in human form, then the implications for Mary changed completely.

Paul of Samosata, Bishop of Antioch near the end of the third century, argued that Christ, and therefore Mary, was human.<sup>6</sup> Paul's ideas went against the contemporary popular doctrine of the Church that held that Christ *was* God. But it also went against the popular doctrine of the

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<sup>5</sup> Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 249.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

*populace*, a populace who, even if they were not converts who may at one time have practiced some form of pagan worship (a form of worship that was no stranger to the mother-goddess figure), at least came from a culture where the dominant form of worship was still this same paganism. Early Christians would have had constant, lifelong exposure to the idea of a mother goddess, and this cultural influence can't be ignored when considering the popularity of Christ as God (and therefore Mary as the mother of God).<sup>7</sup>

The term Theotokos was first proposed by Origen in the third century, but didn't gain popularity until the fourth century when debates concerning the nature of Christ inevitably led to the question of Mary's divinity (or humanity).<sup>8</sup> Apollinarius of Laodicea proposed the opposite extreme of Paul of Samosata. He theorized that Christ wasn't human, but rather an entirely divine being.<sup>9</sup> This of course implied that Mary, who gave Christ his divine body, must also be divine herself. But Apollinarius's argument ignored one of the most central tenets of Christianity: that Jesus was both divine and human, the Word of God made flesh. His proposal was not met favorably and "several laws were enacted against his followers."<sup>10</sup>

After these two extreme views, theologians tended to seek a more temperate, albeit more confusing, middle ground on the subject of divinity. Gregory Nazianzus in the late fourth century held that Christ was divine God made human through his birth, that he was simultaneously divine and human within Mary. He contradicts both Paul and Apollinarius by asserting that, while Mary must be more than just a vessel that Christ passed through (she is the

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<sup>7</sup> Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 249.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

means by which he gained his humanity), she is also firmly human (which would seem to contradict the ability she must also have of granting humanity to the divine).<sup>11</sup> Gregory's theology is a complex one, but it satisfies the Christian requirement that Christ be both man and God, and it situates Mary accordingly.

These debates on Christ's divinity and humanity continued until 431 when the Council of Ephesus officially declared Mary the Theotokos, the God-bearer, allowing Christ to be both divine and human.<sup>12</sup> After Ephesus, many theologians' concept of Christ shifted somewhat to specify that Christ was God who had emptied himself into a human body, a process only possible through the virgin birth.<sup>13</sup> Mary's physical, earthly body, as the means of birth, is emphasized while simultaneously given a divine quality so that it is able to be the vessel of such a transformation. This contradiction eventually led theologians to conclude that Mary must be more than a human woman. The idea of Immaculate Conception was introduced and Mary became free of original sin, a pure vessel for the divine. She accorded the status of Queen of Heaven, explaining her ability to be the vessel of God.<sup>14</sup>

These theological developments, Mary as Theotokos and Mary as the Queen of Heaven, occurred "several steps behind popular piety,"<sup>15</sup> which had already granted Mary both statuses in keeping with the tradition associated with pagan goddesses. Early Christian scholars took years

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<sup>11</sup> Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 252.

<sup>12</sup> The Council had not met to address issues of Mary's role in the Church and so her new title was given mainly to settle Christ's duality.

<sup>13</sup> Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 258.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

to arrive at the same conclusion that local populations arrived at organically through previous religious figures and their representations. Newly converted Christians bestowed on Mary the concept of a divine mother and a queen, characteristics that previous pagan figures had embodied.

### Isis and Mary

Isis originated from the Nile River Valley in Egypt where she was worshipped as the goddess of family, the bringer of life, and the ideal mother and wife.<sup>16</sup> She was described as a benevolent goddess, a virgin who bore a son, and a mother who reigned as queen in Heaven. These attributes are nearly identical to Mary and, considering the shared location of both Isis's cult and early Christianity (Egypt and the Mediterranean) along with the similarity between nearly contemporary imagery of the two figures, it has often been argued that Marian devotion was directly influenced by the cult of Isis.<sup>17</sup>

Isis and her brother/husband Osiris (the god associated with death and the underworld) were both conceived by Nut and Geb, the goddess of the sky and the god of the earth, respectively. The siblings "fell in love and had mated"<sup>18</sup> while still in the womb. After their birth, the story of Isis and Osiris varies based on the source of the myth. According to Plutarch, Osiris was killed and dismembered by a rival god, Seth. Isis managed to find most of the body (only the penis remained lost), restored Osiris to life, and later conceived their son Horus (the god who came to be associated with the sky and sun). Another version of the story has Osiris

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<sup>16</sup> R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 36



returned to life by the gods, but not before Isis “miraculously conceived”<sup>19</sup> Horus. Through this one story, the resemblance between Isis and Mary is apparent. Both Isis and Mary experience the death of a close male family member who is soon restored to life. Whether Osiris is restored by Isis or the other Egyptian gods, his death is not permanent. This is similar to Christ’s resurrection after the crucifixion. Osiris and Jesus play very different roles in the lives of Isis and Mary, but the stories share the common thread of death and rebirth. There is also the connection between the two miraculous conceptions. Isis conceives Horus while Osiris is either dead or incapable of fathering a child. She gives birth to the son of a god without physical impregnation, just as Mary did.

But the variant stories of one myth, no matter how closely similar that myth is to aspects of Jesus’s birth, is not enough to show that Isis and Mary are related. To add to this, Isis also represents the strange dichotomy of virgin and mother that Mary embodied. Isis was known as the “most sublime deification of Motherhood,”<sup>20</sup> but in the Osiris Hymn she is referred to as ‘The Great Virgin.’<sup>21</sup> Isis was a “maternal life force” while on Earth, but “reigned as queen” in Heaven.<sup>22</sup> This almost foresees Mary’s future role as Queen of Heaven, and corresponds to Mary’s early place in Christianity as an earthly mother. Isis was also associated with the “origin of life,”<sup>23</sup> just as Mary, through Christ, was associated with the origin of salvation, of life beyond death.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>20</sup> Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>23</sup> Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 44.

Not only do the myths and attributes of Isis resemble Mary, but the similar location of their cults make it all the more likely that earlier Marian devotion grew out of, or at least was heavily influenced by, worship of Isis. Isis's cult "grew in importance"<sup>24</sup> and spread from Egypt to Greece and Italy during the Hellenistic times. Isis's identity began to merge with the Greek goddess Demeter, and Osiris and Horus became Dionysus and Apollo.<sup>25</sup> By the fourth century BCE Isis was worshipped in Athens. Archaeological excavations in Pompeii revealed the cult's popularity there by the first century CE.<sup>26</sup> The cult was officially recognized in Rome by Caligula in the first century CE.<sup>27</sup> Worship of Isis continued under Christian rule until it, along with the remaining pagan cults, was discontinued at the end of the fourth century.<sup>28</sup>

During the period when Christianity and the cult of Isis existed simultaneously, the iconography of Mary and Isis began to share many traits. Among the earliest known images of Mary are the wall paintings from the third century CE in the Christian Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome (Figure 1).<sup>29</sup> Here, Mary is seated and holding the Christ child, who grips her bared breast. The image is similar to a nearly contemporary fresco from the fourth century CE of Isis and Horus from Egypt (Figure 2). Isis is also seated and holding her son. She bares her left breast for Horus, clearly about to nurse. This manner of depicting Isis was not a new one at the time. The

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<sup>24</sup> Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 44.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>29</sup> Sabrina Higgins, "Diving Mothers: The Influence of Isis on the Virgin Mary in Egyptian *Lactans*-Iconography," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies* 3-4, no. 1 (2012): 73.

image of Isis seated and Horus suckling appears throughout Egyptian art for centuries before the previously mentioned fresco (see Figure 3). The similarity between the images is obvious - both Mary and Isis are shown seated with their sons at their breasts. Their roles as mothers are emphasized. This makes sense for the cult of Isis, as one of her most important aspects was a divine mother. But it also makes sense for Marian devotion at the time. As of the third century, Mary had not yet been recognized as the Queen of Heaven. It was her earthly role as Christ's mother that made her important, and this obviously influenced the artistic choices that led to her image in the Roman catacombs.

The possibility of influence and association between the two figures did not escape the contemporary theologian Tertullian's notice. Not wanting anyone to confuse Mary with her idolatrous pagan counterpart, Tertullian of Carthage specifically refrained from discussing "mythical associations with Mary's motherhood."<sup>30</sup> He instead emphasizes Mary's humanity and her bearing of a human child.<sup>31</sup> By drawing attention away from Mary's divinity, and through her, Christ's divinity as well, the number of potential parallels between Mary and Isis was reduced. There was after all no doubt of Isis's, or her son Horus's, divine nature. Mary as a human woman was less pagan than Mary as the bearer of the divine Christ.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Sally Cuneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 66.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 67. Incidentally, this also worked as a means of dissuading certain sects from focusing on Christ's divinity while ignoring his humanity. The Word of God made *flesh* was still an important aspect of the early Christian church, and the concept demanded Christ embody both God and Man.

<sup>32</sup> As we've seen, not long after this, after the Council of Ephesus, Mary was also granted a divine status as Queen of Heaven. At this earlier point in Christian theology, however, Mary does not seem to be as firmly separated from her pagan counterparts and thus any means of comparison threatened to associate Christianity with pagan beliefs.

Isis was not the only popular pagan mother goddess that early Christians would have encountered. In *The Virgin Goddess*, Stephen Benko argues that the influence of the Mother Earth goddess Cybele in Asia Minor was at least as important in forming Mary's image and theology as Isis. Conditioned by Cybele's influence, Christians in the area were "more sensitive toward the female aspect of God."<sup>33</sup> Likewise, they were more readily accepting of Mary's conception and birth of Christ, as "the union of the divine and human was prominent"<sup>34</sup> in the area. These are important theological points and probably had their own degree of influence on early Christianity, but Mary's earliest imagery is still more similar to that of Isis than Cybele.

#### Eve, the Old Testament, and Mary

Mary not only shares characteristics with pagan mother goddesses, but also with the Biblical figure Eve. Instead of pagan traditions, these parallels draw on the stories of the Jewish Old Testament, the precursor to Christianity. Although this influence is theological and not iconographic as traditions associated with Isis are, it is still an important aspect of Mary in the early Church.

In the Old Testament Eve is the cause of humanity's downfall. Mary of the New Testament bears the child that will erase Eve's sin. Mary, as a vessel, plays a part in humanity's salvation. Eve gives in to the temptation of the Devil, while Mary gives herself over to the will of God. The parallels in their stories are clear, and early Christian theologians were eager to emphasize them. Justin Martyr, a second-century Christian convert who was the first author to

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<sup>33</sup> Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 264.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

compare the two women,<sup>35</sup> even goes so far as to connect the two women through their virginity. Eve was untouched in the Garden before the Fall, and Mary was a virgin when she bore the Christ child. In addition to their purity, both women are also Biblical mothers. Eve bears Cain and Abel after the Fall, and Mary is the mother of Jesus. Eve's children perpetuate their mother's disobedience and sin in Cain's murder of his brother, while Mary's child brings salvation and life. Eve brings about sin and downfall, while Mary introduces salvation and forgiveness through her son.<sup>36</sup> Mary (and through her, the entire Christian Church)<sup>37</sup> completes the conflict that Eve began, linking Christianity to Judaism.

Tertullian also had an opinion to offer on the subject of Eve and Mary. Still concerned with the idea of the Word made flesh, Tertullian linked them by conception through *words*. Eve's conception is symbolic: the serpent's words *conceive* in her mind the idea of disobedience. Mary is made pregnant through the "Word of God directly,"<sup>38</sup> and the connection to words and impregnation is more literal. Of course, there is also the opposition of the source of conception: Eve is 'impregnated' by the Devil, Mary by God. In both cases, ideas or words use the female figure as the vessel by which they are made reality, or physical flesh. Even with this comparison,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>36</sup> Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 237 - 238. In his second-century text, *Adversus Haereses*, the Christian theologian Irenaeus also drew comparisons between Christ/Ada and Eve/Mary. Adam was disobedient and sinful and therefore the cause of humanity's downfall and original sin. Christ exists in antithesis to this. Obedient and heavenly, he brings about humanity's salvation. Just as Adam has his New Testament counterpart in Jesus, so too is Eve reimagined in the form of Mary who, by bearing her son, has brought the answer of salvation to Eve's original sin.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 242. Benko points out that Mary was also frequently compared to the Church through their roles as "mothers" of sorts. The Church was the means by which sinful mankind could receive salvation, just as Mary was the vessel through which Christ, who offers redemption through his death, was born.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 240.

the opposition between the beginning and ending of sin still exists and is crucial for establishing Mary as the successor figure to Eve, Christianity as the successor religion to Judaism.

Christianity is further tied to the Old Testament through the figure of the people of Israel, who stands for all of “God’s chosen people.”<sup>39</sup> In the Old Testament, Israel is frequently “referred to as female and sometimes as a virgin.”<sup>40</sup> This allowed for another connection between the Old Testament and the New. The Old Testament symbol of the virginal woman Israel is fleshed out by the New Testament character of Mary. The connection between the two religions added legitimacy to Christianity. Mary as the physical personification of the people of Israel would have added to this connection. Mary-as-Israel was not a new figure but rather a familiar metaphor come to life. Israel symbolized “the totality of the people of God.”<sup>41</sup> Mary is not just a metaphor but the actual figure who stands for all of God’s people. This would have made her (and again, through her, the Church) more appealing to the Jewish population who already saw themselves as God’s people.

### Uses of Mary

Although Mary was primarily important in the early Church for her relationship to Christ, her image most likely held a different significance to converted populations. Mary as a divine mother would have been a natural transition for pagan converts, especially those who worshipped Isis. The similarity between the iconography of the two (whether a deliberate choice on behalf of the artist to relate Mary to Isis or an instance of the cult of Isis influencing Marian

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<sup>39</sup> Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 243.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 244.

imagery) would have provided an instant visual parallel for pagan converts or those who were simply familiar with Isis. Early Marian imagery was especially appealing to newly converted pagans, who were so accustomed to previous religions with multiple female figures.<sup>42</sup> Rather than attempting to establish a new, unfamiliar images for Mary, Christian artists and theologians simply borrowed from pre-existing pagan traditions.

Similarly, Mary was compared to the Old Testament figure Eve to tie Christianity to Judaism. The very specific comparisons made by contemporary theologians helped to establish Mary as a similar and parallel figure to Eve. By Christian standards, Mary completes Eve's story and therefore gives legitimacy to the new Church. Mary could likewise be seen as the physical representation of the symbol Israel. This too would serve to tie the two faiths together and validate Christianity. Again, instead of establishing a new figure, early Christian theologians used Eve and Israel to create Mary's Christian identity.

Concepts and images of Mary were also used to establish a doctrine of behavior for the new converts. With Constantine's rise to power, the Church quickly became a powerful political force.<sup>43</sup> As a new political entity replacing the previous pagan regime, the Church had to create new domestic policies and create new ideals by which its citizens were to live.

Tertullian, writing in the second and third centuries, very explicitly discussed Mary as a role model for contemporary Christian women. He mostly uses Mary as a contrast for Eve. Through Eve, he blames all women for sin. In *De Cultu Feminarum* he calls women "the devil's

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<sup>42</sup> Mullin, *A Short World History of Christianity*, 69 – 70.

<sup>43</sup> Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 17.

gateway”<sup>44</sup> and accuses them of the sin that made Christ’s sacrifice necessary. Befitting to Tertullian’s view on her gender, Mary is not entirely immune to this criticism. But while Tertullian does postulate that Mary was not a follower of Christ, he still emphasizes her obedience.<sup>45</sup> His attention to Mary’s obedience, when taken with (or in opposition to) his moralizing message on Eve, seems like the beginnings of an instruction manual, a do-and-don’t list for early Christian women. *Do not* fall prey to worldly temptation; *do* emulate the Virgin’s obedience and piety. These messages would have played an important role in shaping the expectations the rising Christian nation would have had for its female citizens.

Athanasius, a fourth-century Alexandrian patriarch and Christian writer, also used Mary as a positive example for female citizens. In his work *Letter to Virgins*, he describes Mary as faithful and modest. Mary as a virgin became the ideal model for Christian women, “hard at work, meek and free of trouble.”<sup>46</sup> Athanasius explains that it was Mary’s piety and patience that led to her being chosen by God to bear Christ,<sup>47</sup> implying that women who followed Mary’s example could also hope to one day gain divine favor.

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<sup>44</sup> Cuneen, *In Search of Mary*, 68.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.





Figure 1. Mary nursing the Christ child, third century CE. Wall painting. Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome, Italy.



Figure 2. Isis and Horus, fourth century CE. Fresco. Karanis, Egypt.



Figure 3. Isis and Horus, sixth/seventh century BCE. Bronze statue. Egypt.

## **The Virgin in New Spain: Conquest, Tonantsi, and Guadalupe**

### Spain during the Early Colonial Expansion

Over a thousand years later, the Christian Church had developed into a major political force in the Western world. The Catholic Church maintained strong, influential ties to those countries that practiced its faith.<sup>48</sup> As these countries, including Spain, began expanding their territory through colonialism they brought the church with them in such forms as religious officials and personal beliefs and practices. But the Church held no political power in these newly conquered territories before the arrival of the Europeans. The local populations had no experience with Christianity. As it had a thousand years previously, the Church was once again in a position of having to validate itself and its beliefs to a local population that already had an established religion. The manner in which the Church handled the conversion of the local Aztec population in Mexico is reflected in images of Mary in Spain and Mexico.

In 1492 Spain was completely retaken by Christian armies from the invading Moors.<sup>49</sup> The ties between church and state were extremely strong in Spain at the time and the Iberian peninsula was made Catholic again through forced conversion and the expulsion of those who practiced other faiths.<sup>50</sup> The victory allowed the monarchy to fund its first colonial expedition to South America and Spain joined its fellow European powers in colonial expansion.<sup>51</sup> This reunification and subsequent expansion was characterized by the strong unity between the

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<sup>48</sup> By this time, the Protestant Reformation had already swept through Europe. Spain maintained its loyalty to the Catholic Church and to the Pope in Rome.

<sup>49</sup> Mullin, *A Short World History of Christianity*, 149.

<sup>50</sup> Mullin, *A Short World History of Christianity*, 157.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Church and the Spanish government and a “rigid, Crusading Catholicism”<sup>52</sup> that spread to the New World. Mary played an important part in early colonial Spain. She was a favorite with both Queen Isabella and Hernando Cortez, who carried her image on a banner during his 1521 conquest of Mexico.<sup>53</sup>

After 1521, the Spanish Church began a systematic conversion of the local population. Catholic missionaries began baptizing the Aztecs by the masses. One missionary reported baptizing over ten thousand people in a single day.<sup>54</sup> Although a nearly fantastic claim, the number of baptisms in the New World was certainly high. By the 1540s, around “one and a half million people had been baptized.”<sup>55</sup> New churches were built in Mexico to accommodate and minister to these new converts. It was here that the local populations would have first encountered images and stories of the Virgin Mary. But for most of this population, these images “coincided with the traumatic transformation of a whole way of life.”<sup>56</sup> To add to this conflict, a discontent middle class of sorts began to rise in New Spain. The creole population, those of European descent born in the New World, was “disdained by the peninsulars, [and] excluded from the topmost positions of local government.”<sup>57</sup> These strong divides in Mexican culture don’t seem to lend themselves to the formation of a national religious icon, but in 1648 a creole

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*, 379 - 387.

<sup>54</sup> Mullin, *A Short World History of Christianity*, 158.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Rubin, *Mother of God*, 386.

<sup>57</sup> Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531 - 1797* (Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1995), 1.

named Miguel Sánchez published the first known account of the legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Theologically and iconographically, Guadalupe was influenced by other pre-existing figures, including the Aztec goddess Tonantsi, the Virgin of Guadalupe in Spain, and the woman of Revelation 12.

### Mary and Tonantsi

The Virgin of Guadalupe fit into the local trend of worshipping ever less aggressive goddesses. Instead of the god of war Huitzilopochtli, the Aztecs had begun to emphasize the less cruel goddess Coatlicue, who had stopped demanding sacrifices of human blood. Despite this concession, Coatlicue remained the mother goddess of snakes and skulls, and she too was eventually replaced by a gentler goddess. The Totonac Indians, a group living under the rule of the Aztecs, preferred to worship the mother goddess Tonantsi, who only required small animal sacrifices. This same Tonantsi was worshipped at the base of Tepeyac Hill and was later replaced by, or transformed into, the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose chapel was built on the same location. Guadalupe then “represents the Indian mother goddess in the third and most benevolent transformation.”<sup>58</sup>

Guadalupe was accepted by the native Indians as the final stage in the line of mother goddesses (Coatlicue-Tonantsi-Guadalupe). According to Ena Campbell, the native population began to worship Guadalupe and Tonantsi as a dual figure. That is, she was simultaneously Guadalupe the Christian Virgin Mary *and* Tonantsi the Aztec mother goddess. Guadalupe-Tonantsi served as a protector against the invading Spaniard’s Christian god, not allowing him to

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<sup>58</sup> Ena Campbell, “The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Female Self-Image: A Mexican Case History” in *Mother Worship: Theme and Variation*, ed. James J. Preston (United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 12.

harm the Aztecs.<sup>59</sup> She particularly protected mothers, children, and the poor. Tonantsi transformed as Guadalupe took on these roles as intercessor and protector just as the Virgin traditionally did. Tonantsi-Guadalupe was a middle ground of worship between the traditional mother goddess and the Spaniard's Virgin Mary.

### The Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura

The Extremadura region in Spain was “home to a large number of conquistadors, including Cortes...and provided a disproportionately large percentage of the first settlers of Mexico.”<sup>60</sup> As such, the religious icons of Extremadura, particularly the Virgin of Guadalupe, would have been easily recognizable to most Spaniards living in Mexico during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At that time in Spain stories that featured the appearance of the Virgin and “resulted in the foundation of shrines or chapels”<sup>61</sup> were fairly common. They mostly follow the same format as the two Guadalupe stories. A poor person, or a member of the disenfranchised class, receives a vision of the Virgin. The vision is usually not readily accepted by the local clergy, but the recipient of the vision stays true to the Virgin and the clergy is eventually convinced. The apparition appearing to the lower-class citizen (who then triumphs over the skepticism of the more powerful clergy) shows Mary's belonging to all citizens of the community.

The legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura begins with the image itself (Figure 4). It was supposedly given by Pope Gregory to St. Leander of Seville and hidden in the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 23.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 22.

mountains during the Moorish invasion.<sup>62</sup> Years later a herdsman named Gil Cordero wandered into the Guadalupe Mountains looking for a lost cow. He found it dead, but it was miraculously returned to life. The Virgin then appeared to Cordero, telling him her image was in a cave nearby. Cordero returned home to share his vision with the local authorities, but, upon arriving home, found his son dead. Like the cow, the boy was “immediately returned to life.”<sup>63</sup> The sign was seen by the clergy as proof of Cordero’s vision. Cordero and a priest returned to the mountains and found the Virgin’s statue. A shrine was erected on the site to commemorate the miracles. In truth the shrine existed before the story,<sup>64</sup> but the story became generally accepted as a “miraculous explanation for its origin.”<sup>65</sup>

#### The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain

The first published appearance of the Juan Diego story is in the 1648 book *Image of the Virgin Mary* by a priest Miguel Sánchez.<sup>66</sup> In this work, Sánchez relates the story of Juan Diego, the recent Aztec convert who received a vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyac. According to Sánchez, in 1531, Juan Diego, was visited by Mary. She instructed him to deliver a message to the local bishop that a church be built on the site she stood – Tepeyac Hill, the former location of the temple of the Aztec goddess Tonantsi. At her request Diego eventually managed to gain an audience with the bishop and relayed the Virgin’s message. He was twice dismissed by the dubious bishop, before finally being told to return with more tangible proof. The Virgin

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>64</sup> Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 24.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 1.

again appeared to Diego, telling him to bring the bishop roses that had miraculously grown on the site of their first meeting – miraculous, for it was December and the roses were blooming out of season. Diego again complied with the Virgin’s wishes, put the flowers in his cape, and brought them to the bishop. Several officials working for the bishop demanded to see what Diego had brought. When Diego opened his cape, the flowers became a part the fabric and, as he showed the bishop the miracle, an image of the Virgin also materialized on the cape. The bishop acknowledged these miracles as proof of Diego’s visions and a chapel was built at Tepeyac Hill to honor the occurrences and the Virgin.

After agreeing on this account, sources discussing the Virgin of Guadalupe vary widely on the reception of the new image of the Virgin. According to Ena Campbell, Guadalupe was quickly and enthusiastically received by the local population of recent Aztec converts who saw Guadalupe as the “miraculous incarnation” of Tonantsi. Campbell presents a more mixed reaction from the Spanish clergy. Some, she argues, identified Guadalupe with the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura. Others were violently opposed to the new Guadalupe, worrying that the former Aztecs’ worship of her was nearly identical to their worship of Tonantsi, making Guadalupe a pagan image. Campbell even goes on to say that some of these priests urged the destruction of the shrine and cult of Guadalupe. The idea of the dual identity that Guadalupe-Tonantsi had begun to take on was considered sacrilegious and that any worship of Guadalupe was “a satanic device to mask idolatry.” Despite this resistance, Campbell asserts that the cult of Guadalupe remained popular with both the Indian and Spanish populations.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Campbell, “The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Female Self-Image,” 7 – 8.

Stafford Poole, writing more recently in *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, tells a different story. According to Poole, Guadalupe first appealed to the creoles of New Spain.<sup>68</sup> Although the man receiving the vision of Guadalupe (the protagonist of the story) was a native convert, Poole claims that Sánchez's writings "[downplay] the Indian dimension of the apparition account and devotion"<sup>69</sup> A second account of Juan Diego's visions was published a year after Sánchez's *The Image of the Virgin Mary*. This new version aimed to reach out to the native population, but Guadalupe still maintained more popularity with the creole population, who saw her as a rallying point for a new national identity separate from the oppressive Europeans.<sup>70</sup> Twelve years later in 1660 a Jesuit priest Mateo de la Cruz published an abridged adaptation of Sánchez's writings, and Guadalupe worship spread rapidly. Over the next few decades numerous churches were built dedicated to the Virgin. The Indians, however, remained untouched by Guadalupe's newfound influence over the creoles.

Conover, writing very recently, agrees with Poole that Guadalupe had a stronger influence on the creole population than the native one. Where the two disagree is on the level of Guadalupe's popularity argued by Poole. Poole suggests a level of nationalism among the creole population that Conover argues simply was not there. During the late seventeenth century, Conover lists several churches dedicated to Catholic saints built in Mexico City - none dedicated to Guadalupe. "If holy figures represented political loyalties, then Mexico City leaned more toward European devotions than local ones."<sup>71</sup> Other saints had more sermons published in their

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<sup>68</sup> Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 1.



names than Guadalupe,<sup>72</sup> and city councilmen “spent twenty years lobbying the pope for a series of devotional privileges on behalf of Sta. Gertrudis,”<sup>73</sup> not on behalf of Guadalupe. Conover argues that the Virgin of Los Remedios, whom the clergy had found to be particularly effective at ending droughts, was a more popular figure until 1737, when she failed to end a plague of typhoid fever in Mexico City.<sup>74</sup> It wasn’t until the Virgin of Guadalupe was prayed to for assistance that the plague began to subside. Guadalupe was subsequently credited with ending the plague, and her popularity with the creoles in Mexico City rose to the levels argued by Poole. The influence of the Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain is thus a subject that is still contested. While more recent authorities claim that the creoles found Guadalupe more appealing than the local population did, these same authorities disagree on *when* Guadalupe’s appeal began.

A closer examination of the images of the two Virgins of Guadalupe reveals the role the Church played in each culture. The Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura is very regal. Her clothes are ornate and nearly overwhelm her body. Her equally extravagant crown and scepter firmly situate her as the Queen of Heaven. This makes sense for the Church in Spain at the time, which was so closely tied to Spanish monarchy. The image doesn’t attempt to appeal to a lower class or even a disgruntled middle class. The Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico is much more simply dressed. She still wears a crown, but her outfit and posture are simple and humble (especially when compared to the image in Spain). Her drapery is almost reminiscent of the simple cape worn by Juan Diego, the same cape on which her image appeared.

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<sup>71</sup> Cornelius Conover, “Reassessing the Rise of Mexico’s Virgin of Guadalupe, 1650s - 1780s,” *Mexican Studies* 27, no. 2 (2011): 264.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>74</sup> Conover, “Reassessing the Rise of Mexico’s Virgin of Guadalupe,” 254

Both representations of Mary are associated with stories that appeal to a lower-class population, a population more at risk for being isolated by the ruling class and, because of the strong ties between the monarchy and its religion, the Church. The legends of both Virgins then provide a relatable face for the Church. The Virgin stands for the Church and *also* the population. But their images clearly don't serve the same function. The Virgin of Extremadura dresses like royalty, like the Queen of Heaven. Her image doesn't attempt to reach out to lower-class populations. This is most likely due to the Church's authority in Spain. It was evidently enough that the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe began by appearing to a lower class citizen. The Virgin did not also have to share such an appearance or dress. The Church already had the support of the well-established ruling class and the local population. New Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was completely different. The Church, while well-established with the invading Christian population, was a new force with the local people. The simple piety of her image reflects this tenuous relationship. Her robes would have undoubtedly spoke more to the native population than garments as ornate and unfamiliar as the Virgin of Extremadura's. The Virgin of New Spain's crown maintains her position as Queen of Heaven. Her hands are clasped in a humble, pious position of prayer. Despite her crown she is humble, a modesty that the Virgin of Extremadura, who holds a scepter and looks straight ahead, does not demonstrate). Her image seeks to appeal to the local population while still maintaining her ties to and roles within the Church.

Her pose may also have served as a tool by which the Church communicated its expectations for its followers. If the newly converted Aztecs looked up to Mary, then perhaps they would also imitate her humble, somewhat subservient attitude. Mary's image in Spain has none of this. Mary is extravagantly clothed and looks blatantly ahead at the viewer who in

comparison is spiritually beneath her. The Church in Mexico did not have centuries of tradition and established political dominance to validate its imagery. The Church in Mexico needed to establish its dominance, and the appearance of a Christian role model who appeared contrite and subservient despite (or even *in spite of*) her crown and royal status can't be coincidence.

### Sánchez, Guadalupe, and Revelation

Sánchez's *The Image of the Virgin Mary* is not just an account of Juan Diego's visions of the Virgin. It is also a highly analytic work that relies heavily on New and Old Testament symbolism<sup>75</sup> to validate and explain the Virgin of Guadalupe's appearance (Figure 5), which is very different from the Guadalupe of Extremadura<sup>76</sup>. Sánchez describes the image of the Virgin in the church at Tepeyac. The fabric, he says, is a "coarse mantle"<sup>77</sup> and the paint is remarkably well-preserved. Sánchez related the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe with the image of the woman in chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation. The likeness between the two figures is obvious. The woman in Revelation is described as "clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and

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<sup>75</sup> Sánchez goes on to make many more comparisons between the Virgin of Guadalupe and Biblical symbols and settings that are not discussed in this paper, connecting Tepeyac to Bethel and Jacob's ladder of angels; the cape to the goatskin Rebecca gave to Jacob; and Juan Diego to Adam, to name a few.

<sup>76</sup> David A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 136. The Mexican Guadalupe does not resemble Spanish Guadalupe, who is shown seated and holding the Christ child. Francisco de San José, a prior of Guadalupe in Extremadura, wrote a comparison between the two figures and explained that the Virgin of Guadalupe was copied from an image of the Virgin's "Immaculate Conception as the Woman of the Apocalypse," which had existed in the church of Guadalupe of Extremadura before the Spanish conquest of Mexico.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

upon her head a crown of twelve stars.”<sup>78</sup> The Virgin of Guadalupe stands on a crescent moon, radiates light from her body (thus making her in a sense “clothed with the sun”), and wears a crown. When attributing the Virgin of Guadalupe to the woman from Revelation, Sánchez likewise drew parallels between the rest of Revelation and the conquering of Mexico. Cortez and his men were likened to Michael and his angels, destroying the dragon who is at times either Moctezuma or the god of war Huitzilopochtli in order to establish a Christian kingdom.<sup>79</sup>

Sánchez’s work was well received by his contemporaries. Brading mentions a “creole chancellor of the cathedral chapter,” “Pedro de Rozas, an Augustinian friar,” and “Dr. Antonio de Lara Mogrovejo, a judge in the high court of Mexico” as critics who all praised the Sánchez’s writings.<sup>80</sup> Dr. Francisco de Siles, a young professor of theology, particularly admired Sánchez, seeing him as speaking on behalf of all his countrymen and establishing Mexico’s unique religious history.<sup>81</sup> In truth, the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe was known and worshipped before Sánchez wrote his *Image of the Virgin Mary*. But it was Sánchez’s writings that gave the Mexican Church a theological basis for an “autonomous, sacred foundation.”<sup>82</sup> For this very reason, his works, which were “most powerfully manifest in...sermons,”<sup>83</sup> and the Virgin of Guadalupe herself were particularly popular among the creole population (Sánchez himself was a

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<sup>78</sup> “Revelation 12:1-9 (King James Version)” in *Bible Gateway*, <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+12&version=KJV> (accessed March - April 2014).

<sup>79</sup> Brading, *Mexican Phoenix*, 65.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 57

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>82</sup> Brading, *Mexican Phoenix*, 74.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

creole), as it provided them a form and figure of worship that was uniquely theirs, independent of the European population who viewed the creoles as a lower class of citizens.

Although it is useful to observe the reaction of Sánchez's peers, this tells us nothing of the Indian population's reaction to such a comparison. In *Mexican Phoenix*, David Brading cites Guadalupe as the means of "[uniting] Indians and creoles...in common devotion"<sup>84</sup> under the universal protection and motherhood of the Virgin. Sánchez himself observed in the Indians a high degree of devotion to Guadalupe. But such a conclusion should not be taken out of context of whatever bias Sánchez may have had.

It would be appropriate at this point to recall the transition and transformation of Tonantsi into Guadalupe that likely made the Christian Virgin more relatable to the local population at the time of initial conversion. This, combined with the creoles' enthusiastic support of Guadalupe as the new patroness of Mexico and her history in the wealthy Spanish region of Extremadura, seems to make Guadalupe the ultimate unifying and pacifying figure. She appeals to the Europeans by reminding them of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura, to the creoles by being the right combination of Spanish tradition and Mexican adaptation that appealed to their mixed European and American heritages while giving them a new religious identity independent of the Europeans they saw as oppressive, and to the Indians by continuing the tradition of their previous mother goddesses. But the evidence for the natives' support of Guadalupe just doesn't seem to exist on the same level as the creoles'. One has to wonder the role that Sánchez's writings would have played in that lack of support. Although Sánchez was writing over a hundred and twenty years after Cortez's original conquest of Mexico, the local population in the seventeenth century must have felt at least to some extent still culturally connected to the Aztecs.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

How socially isolating, then, would Sánchez's comparison of a former Aztec leader and god to the Devil have been for the native people who heard such sermons?<sup>85</sup>



Figure 4. The Virgin of Guadalupe, based on the fourteenth century image. Sculpture. Guadalupe, Spain.



Figure 5. Our Lady of Guadalupe in her sanctuary, 1648. Engraving in *The Image of the Virgin Mary* by Miguel Sánchez.

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<sup>85</sup> This is, of course, mostly speculation, but it is drawn from the reality of Sanchez's writings and their popularity. His works were known to have been adapted to many popular sermons featuring the Virgin of Guadalupe. It seems likely that at least one would have mentioned the comparison between Revelation and the conquest of Mexico.

## **Conclusion**

The images of Mary in Early Christian art in the Roman Empire are the result of different cultural and political forces than those of the Virgins of Guadalupe in Spain and colonial Mexico. Images Mary in the Roman Empire were far more rare and her popularity was largely due to her role as Christ's mother, while Mary in later centuries was used to actively convert local populations. Early images of Mary in the Mediterranean were strikingly similar to images of the local goddess Isis. The two also shared many theological characteristics and adding a visual component to the similarities would have helped convince pagan converts that Mary was a form of Isis, albeit a Christian, non-pagan form. Mary was also theologically similar to Eve. Their two stories often had parallels that opposed and completed one another. The two women served to link the Old and New Testaments, and, through the books, Judaism and Christianity. Early Christian theologians were careful to emphasize similarities between Eve and Mary, in order to show that Christianity had its roots in Jewish traditions. This gave the Church an element of validity, that it could be seen as by Christian theology as the next step after Judaism.

The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico was used similar ways to theologically and visually ease the transition of the Aztec population to their new Christian faith and to support the rising nationalism of the creole population. The Virgin is similar to the Aztec goddess Tonantsi and can even be seen to represent the third phase of a transition to a more nurturing mother goddess. The origin story of Guadalupe reaches out to the native Aztecs through Juan Diego and through the placement of the vision and subsequent shrine at Tepeyac, where Tonantsi was previously worshipped. Guadalupe was physically situated as a successor to Tonantsi. The story of Guadalupe in Mexico is nearly identical to the previous legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura, Spain, the same region from which so many early explorers and

colonists originated. In both stories, a local man is called upon by the Virgin to speak on her behalf to the clergy. In both cases, the local men are given miraculous proofs of the Virgin's existence to present to the clergy and a shrine is built to honor the miracles. The similarities between the stories would not have gone unnoticed by the Spanish and creole populations in Mexico. Rather, it would have made the Virgin of Guadalupe a more acceptable figure to worship, given their previous experience with her. Through the writings of Miguel Sánchez, the creole population especially favored the new Virgin. Sánchez, through careful application of Biblical symbolism, created a new figure who stood for all of Mexico, independent of the Spanish traditions. The popularity of Guadalupe among the converted Aztec population shortly after the time of conquest is still a subject of some contention, and seems to require much more in depth study to finalize.

What is clear is that in both cases the Christian Church felt the need to draw on existing religious traditions to convert the local populations. The strategy makes sense; most cultures build on the ones from which they emerge. It is interesting to note that the early Church relied on pagan and Jewish figures to create a new virginal figure, while the Church at the time of Spanish colonialism drew on pagan and other *Christian* figures. The Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was so well established that it could be influenced by its own pre-existing figures and still create new, legitimate imagery.

In both instances the images or forms of Mary took on a political aspect. Early Christian theologians used Mary as a set of guidelines by which they expected their citizens, the female ones at least, to conduct themselves. As a new political force in the Mediterranean world, the establishment of such instruction was important in deciding what kind of empire the Church wanted to create. Again, the Church during Spanish colonialism had already established itself



and the manner in which it expected its citizens to live. What came about through the Virgin of Guadalupe was the strengthening of the creole political identity, separate from the ruling Spanish population in Mexico. The stories of Gil Cordero and Juan Diego also carry political overtones. Mary's appearance to a member of the lower class is an obvious attempt by the Church (which in contemporary Spain was inseparable from the monarchy) to reach out to those people who might be disenfranchised by the current regime and therefore more likely to lash out against it. Mary was already tied through the Church to the ruling classes in Spain, but by using members of the lower classes to carry her message she also became tied to those members of the population. Mary in these stories stands as a figure that represents all aspects of society. This is reminiscent of Mary-as-Israel from the early Church. In both instances, Mary is a physical figure who stands for *all* of God's people. The Guadalupe stories are also a reminder of the political hierarchy that existed between the common citizen and the church (and, through the Spanish connection of church and state, the ruling class). In the story, it is the clergy or the bishop who has the ultimate earthly power, thus reassuring the ruling class of their place in society while simultaneously reminding them of a higher, divine power. The lower class citizen, however, gets to be the hero, convincing the upper class clergy through his piety that his story is true (and that the Virgin also speaks for him). The story of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura, Spain, like the Virgin of early Rome, acts as a set of instructions for Spanish citizens. The lower classes have their proper place, subservient to the ruling class and the clergy, who alternately have a duty to those beneath them (the bishop eventually concedes to Diego's story and allows him to participate in the unearthing of the statue) because all citizens are Christians and worthy of the Virgin's protection and patronage. Since the Church was already powerful and well established at the time, such a

set of political guidelines seems superfluous and more a set of reminders than the creation of an instruction manual to Christian citizenship.

Mary had important roles to play in varying aspects of Christian conversion. She was made to conform to the needs of the Church at the time, often times reaching back to previous (even pagan) traditions to make herself more appealing to populations of other faiths. The Church used Marian images as a political tool to shape and reshape its changing faith. Since the beginnings of Christianity, the Virgin has been passed down from hand to hand, tradition to tradition to realize the goals of the Church.

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