

Cutting Our Lady of Guadalupe



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"We who are afraid of the slightest discomfort, whose lives revolve around more cars, more bathrooms, more TV's, more gadgets, more material wealth and goods, how desperately we need you, Mary of Bethlehem and Nazareth! We who are the lonely ones always seeking a crowd, always on the go—to this meeting, that cocktail party, this dance, that date—how desperately we need you, Mary of the Hidden Life! We who are so fearful of pain, so afraid of the cross, so eager to be cross-less Catholics, how desperately we need you, Mary of Golgotha, Mary of the Pieta! Mary of a thousand titles, Mary my mother, teach me, teach us, faith, trust, selflessness, poverty, detachment, obedience, and caritas, love of your Son! Amen."

-Catherine de Hueck Doherty

When I pick up my pen to write a book or pick up my camera to make a film, it's as if I'm going back in time to St. Benedict Joseph Labré School (the grammar school I attended in Queens, New York). Writing and filmmaking for me are ways of learning. Every book, every film teaches me something new. I seem to write about what I don't know in order to enter the subject fully and really learn something. While making films over the last fourteen years, I've learned about homelessness, drug addiction, mental disabilities, the ravages of starvation, and the horror of leprosy. But my 2004 film, *Endless Exodus*, was one of the toughest teachers I've ever had. I filmed throughout El Salvador and Mexico, and along the border in Arizona and California. While making the film, everything I thought about undocumented migrants was turned upside down; I was also forced me to come face-to-face with a part of my Catholic faith that had always left me feeling somewhat ambivalent.

In making a feature-length documentary, a filmmaker shoots a tremendous amount of footage, far more than can ever be used. For instance, on the migrant film, I shot over sixty hours of footage for a two hour film. Cutting often results in blood on the editing room floor. The original script had a number of pages devoted to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Not because I personally had any strong interest in her, but because she had a profound impact on Mexican history and culture, and her influence is still very strong. Half way through the editing of the film, I knew that the material on Our Lady of Guadalupe was never going to make it into the film because of the constraints of time. It truly pained me to cut her story from the film. So I decided to pick up my pen and tell the story in words instead of pictures.

In my travels to developing nations before making *Endless Exodus*, I'd seen the cruel effects of chronic poverty. The misery I encountered in the massive slums of India, Kenya, Brazil, and The Philippines left me feeling physically sick. But I never expected to find crippling poverty practically in my own backyard. From my home in Los Angeles I can get in my car and in less than three hours I can be standing in a garbage dump in Tijuana where kids are scavenging through the waste of others for survival. My film on global poverty, *When Did I See You Hungry?*, which was narrated by Martin Sheen, taught me that pervasive and destructive poverty is a cruel tyrant. The poor are vulnerable to disease and natural disasters. The unjust distribution of resources leaves them living in constant need.

In the face of severe poverty, many Mexicans have to make a painful choice: go north or go hungry. The migrants are forced into the scorching heat of the desert in order to flee the bondage of poverty. To be a migrant often means dying in the desert or drowning in canals. From 1993-2003, over 3,000 migrants died trying to enter the United States.

Amid so much injustice and so much apparent silence from God, the faith of so many migrants is remarkable. God is hidden in their suffering, hidden in great and small acts of resurrection. For the most part, Mexican people have a deep, comforting faith. They thank God for everything and put their trust in God alone. Moreover, Our Lady of Guadalupe is an essential part of the migrant's faith. In fact, one cannot understand or appreciate the Mexican people without a genuine appreciation of Our Lady of Guadalupe. While her story is complicated and often misunderstood, one fact is simple and clear: the Virgin has had a lasting and revolutionary impact on the people of Mexico and Christianity itself, an impact that is profoundly liberating and healing. The historical validity of the story is veiled in doubts and mystery; but there is no doubt that Our Lady of Guadalupe is a living presence in the hearts of countless Mexicans. Devotion to her expresses the deepest nationality of the Mexican people. You cannot escape the presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Latin America. Her image can be seen everywhere...from art to bumper stickers to T-shirts and even to tattoos.

Virgilio Elizondo says, "Guadalupe is not just an apparition, but a major intervention of God's liberating power in history. It is an exodus and resurrection event of an enslaved and dying people. Guadalupe is truly an epiphany of God's love at the precise moment when abandonment by God had been experienced by the people at large." The Virgin beautifully blended together European and Nahuatl traditions concerning God. As Moses brought God's message to the oppressed in Egypt, Mary came to the oppressed of the Americas. Through Mary, Jesus became incarnate in the New World, giving birth to a new church, a new incarnation of Christianity in and of the Americas. Marian apparitions around the world, from Fatima to Lourdes to Guadalupe, have one thing in common: Mary always appears to a poor person.

While Mary the mother of Jesus is a source of inspiration and comfort to Catholics and Orthodox Christians, she unfortunately is shrouded in misunderstanding and confusion for Protestant and Evangelical Christians. In one basic way, all Christians should strive to imitate Mary, because Mary did what we all should do: to bear Christ in the world. Mary was completely open and responsive to the Spirit of God, which allowed her to proclaim the greatness of the Lord and prompted her spirit to rejoice in God her savior.

The brown Lady appeared at a time of great violence, conquest, and shame. In 1519, Cortez landed and the painful Calvary of the Aztec people began. Two years later, after many bloody battles, the Spaniards were victorious and a noble civilization that was impregnated with religion had come to an end. The cross had become a weapon of destruction rather than a symbol of love. The overwhelming force of the white men from Europe had crushed the closely-knit, indigenous society and their heartfelt understanding of God. Everything of value to them, including their religion, art, customs, logic, and language, had been desecrated or destroyed. Everything that gave cohesion and meaning to their existence was crushed. Books and bodies were burned during the massacre of a civilization.

The Spanish takeover of the Aztec empire marked the beginning of a painful period of humiliation, sickness, enslavement, and early death from new diseases for the Aztec people. Worse, they felt abandoned by their gods. Condemned to a subservient existence, they were a broken people without a will to live. The Spanish soldiers and missionaries were so shocked by human sacrifice, that they could see nothing worthwhile in the Aztec religion. The Indians were so horrified by killing in war, they could see nothing good in the conqueror's religion of love. The conflict made communication impossible. After a troubled standoff lasting ten years, the Virgin appeared in the outskirts of Mexico City in 1531 to a humble, poor, middle-aged Christianized Indian named Juan Diego.

Juan Diego had embraced his new faith with exceptional piety. He was walking to Mass one day when he heard the sound of beautiful music sung by birds. As he sought the source of the sound, a woman's voice called his name in the most endearing way. She said she was the holy Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God. She appeared as a short, swarthy Aztec maiden and she spoke the Indian's native dialect, Nahuatl. Her clothes, covered in Aztec symbols, radiated like the sun. Her message was simple and reassuring: I am your merciful mother, come to me, confide in me. I will listen and wipe away your tears.

Mary told Juan to go to the bishop and tell him that she wanted a church built on the hill of Tepeyac where all her children could bring their suffering and problems to her. "Why me," Juan protested, "I am a nobody, and nobody will listen to me." With a little maternal prodding, he agreed to go. The bishop was cordial but unmoved. He told Juan he needed some kind of sign to authenticate this far-fetched story. Juan returned to the Virgin.

Claiming he was unworthy to be her messenger, Juan asked her to send someone else, someone not as lowly as he. She said he was her choice and told him to gather up roses that suddenly appeared among the cactus. The sight of delicate roses blooming in the cold of December must have filled Juan with awe. He gathered up the roses in his *tilma* or cloak and returned to the bishop. Standing before the bishop, Juan unfolded his cloak and the roses fell to the feet of the bishop. Imprinted on the *tilma* itself was the image of the prayerful Virgin. The bishop and his scoffing assistants fell to their knees. Mary's image on the rough cloak was a sign she identified with a suffering, mocked, and victimized people. The appearance gave dignity to the downtrodden, hope to the exploited, and encouragement to those fighting for liberation.

Our Lady of Guadalupe helped purify the native religions of the need for human sacrifice, and called the Church to conversion by offering love and compassion instead of only offering the natives cruel punishment and the threat of eternal damnation. To believe in Our Lady of Guadalupe is to believe in the poor and that God stands among them.

The subjugated people sprang to life because of Guadalupe. The Virgin encouraged the values of self-worth and the beauty of the native language, culture, and tradition. The dark-haired, brown-eyed, maiden spoke to the powerless in the language of the powerless, transforming them from a crushed and silenced people who felt abandoned by God into a people alive to God. Our Lady of Guadalupe marks the dawn of a new day, the resurrection of an entombed people.

Marian devotions are the mysticism of the poor, through which they discover the deep, essential truths about God. Through Mary, they come to know and taste God's love and compassion. Our Lady of Guadalupe came from Mexican soil. She did not come to restore the shattered past; she came to bring the Aztecs something new out of the chaotic events of their past. For millions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, Our Lady of Guadalupe is the vessel in whom and through whom Christ's saving presence is continually incarnated in the soil of North, Central, and South America.

Making *Endless Exodus* forced me to look more closely at Mary. Mary from Nazareth was a woman of the people. Like the people of her time, she did all the things other Jewish women did. She prayed, she went to Temple, she visited her relatives, and she cared for her son. In her very ordinariness, God did great things. In giving birth to Jesus, Mary shows us the importance of letting go of our plans, ideologies, attachments, and peer group pressures because all of those things can become barriers between ourselves and God. Mary's acceptance of the invitation brought to her by the Archangel Gabriel allowed God to fill her body and become visible in the flesh. Mary's "yes" made a cave on the outskirts of an obscure Palestinian village the center of the universe. Mary trusted God. She thought of others, not herself. She cared for the lowly and the humiliated, and spoke out against oppression. She lived among the poor and the humble. She knew poverty, suffering, flight, and exile.

As I walked among the poor in Latin America, I asked myself over and over again: am I being called to enter into the migrant's bondage, to share their pain and frustration? That's what Christ did when he took on human flesh. Christ broke the bondage of sin so we could walk in freedom. We need to break the bondage of poverty so the poor can walk in freedom, so the poor can feel the fullness of God's love. Spending time with the poor and lowly heightened my awareness of the nearly endless choices I have in my life. The poor have few if any choices. Remembering their lack of choices prompts me to be aware of my need to make wiser, more compassionate choices. Compassion helps to free us from clinging to ourselves; it helps us see our kinship with all living beings. Compassion can never be left on the editing room floor of my life.

Our society indulges in a virtual gluttony of greed, gobbling up more and more stuff in a futile attempt to satisfy our every desire. In contrast, Saint Francis of Assisi's love of God led him to a deep appreciation of poverty and a firm commitment to help those in need. The saint's courtship with Lady Poverty taught him to depend on God alone and should help us to embrace the poor and our own poverty. Poverty of spirit is a humble, little room where infinite mystery encounters concrete existence. It's a room where we can empty ourselves in order to be filled with God.

Many poor Mexican people living on the margins of society look at the life of Jesus and they are thrilled to see someone who can really understand their plight. They are amazed to discover that God became someone just like them, someone poor and rejected. Jesus was always willing to enjoy sharing a meal with anyone...even outcasts and sinners, and this revolution of human standards so scandalized the religious people of his times they hurried him along the road to the cross. When we embark on the way of the cross, we travel through suffering and discover the Love that is God within us. We cannot worship God and be indifferent to the poor. Worship without justice and charity is blasphemous. Jesus denounced

power, injustice, and poverty. The core of Christianity is about the cross, suffering, renunciation, and sharing what you have with others. Of course, we don't like hearing that.

St. Oscar Romero, the martyred archbishop of El Salvador, said: "We learn to see the face of Christ—the face of Christ that is also the face of a suffering human being, the face of the crucified, the face of the poor, the face of the saint, and the face of every person—and we love each one with the criteria with which we will be judged: 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat.'" In the parable of the "Last Judgment" found in the 25th Chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Christ tells us that love is the criterion for eternal unity with God. The love Christ is talking about is far from a mere humanitarian concern for abstract justice and the anonymous "poor," but concrete and personal love for the human person, any human person, that God makes us encounter in our lives. When we soothe the trials of others, we encounter Christ.

Every human face is the face of Christ. Learning to see the face of Christ in the face of the poor, in the face of the homeless, in the face of the migrant is not easy. But it is essential. In these faces, we sense goodness and deep beauty, and the grace at the root of it all. In the naked humanity of the migrants, God's redemptive love is revealed. Their faces express the anguished indecision of Gethsemane. The tortured burden of their lives awaits the encompassing embrace of God. Our Lady of Guadalupe came and stood among the poor and oppressed. So should we.

Oh, Mary, Mother of Jesus, cover me with cloak of your all-embracing love. Help me quiet the noise within me. Teach me to be still and pure. Help me to create an oasis of silence and peace within me. Teach me how to give birth to Christ in my little world.