

“The Blessed Virgin Mary in Literature”
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**Don Antonio Valeriano:
Literature as a Messenger of the Mother of God**

Introduction

Literature is a premier expression of the culture of the time. When we read good literature, we see the reflection of the Supreme Good, of God Who is the source of all good. We understand in some way, oftentimes veiled and limited, the good order with which God has created the world and, above all, the heart of man, the only earthly creature whom He created in His own image and likeness. To the degree that a culture recognizes the good and, in so doing, also, in some way, recognizes the Supreme Good, to that degree it will inspire literature which is good. In the time before Christ, we see already in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer, and in the *Aeneid* of Vergil, for example, reflections of the goodness with which God created the human heart. One thinks, for example, of the *pietas* (filial devotion) of Aeneas toward his father Anchises, as it is presented in Vergil’s *Aeneid*. With the Redemptive Incarnation – with the Virginal Conception, Birth, Life in the Holy Family, Public Ministry, Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ –, the Supreme Good chose to come to us, to unite our human nature to His Divine Nature, and to dwell with us always. The Mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation clearly inspires good literature to a degree which is immeasurable and unceasing.

The Holy Bible must be mentioned, from the beginning, as the preeminent form of all literature. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit, that is, the human authors of the various books of the Holy Bible wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In the words of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, of the Second Vatican Council,

To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.¹

¹ “In sacris vero libris conficiendis Deus homines elegit, quos facultatibus ac viribus suis utentes adhibuit, ut Ipso in illis et per illos agente, ea omnia eaque sola, quae Ipse vellet, ut veri auctores scripto traderent.” Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, “Constitutio Dogmatica de Divina Revelatione, *Dei Verbum*,” 18

In the case of the Holy Bible, literature is part of the culture of Divine Love, the culture which God desires to be integral to all cultures. The written word of the Sacred Scriptures is ultimately the expression of the Incarnation, of the Word of God made flesh, in the words of the Prologue of the Gospel according to Saint John. Thus, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, quoting Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, declares:

Still, the Christian faith is not a “religion of the book.” Christianity is the religion of the “Word” of God, a word which is “not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living.” If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must, through the Holy Spirit, “open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures.”²

The written word, literature, gives premier testimony to the truth of the Redemptive Incarnation. It is at the service of the Divine Economy of Eternal Salvation as an irreplaceable tool in opening our minds and hearts to God’s presence and action in our midst.

Although Christian literature cannot claim the Divine Inspiration which guided the Sacred Writers of the Holy Bible, to the degree that writers are attuned and responsive to God, good literature gives expression to the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit and relates in some way to Sacred Scripture. In the case of the *Nican Mopohua*, the most ancient account of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the author, Antonio Valeriano, gives expression to all that Our Lady desired to communicate and do by her appearing to Saint Juan Diego, to his uncle Juan Bernardino, and, through Saint Juan Diego and Juan Bernardino, to Bishop Juan de Zumárraga and his assistants. Even as Our Lord wanted the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe to remain with us by its miraculous imprint on the *tilma* of Saint Juan Diego, Divine Providence wanted also the testimony of Saint Juan Diego to all that Our Lady said and did during the privileged days of her appearing on Tepeyac Hill from December 9th to 12th of 1531 to be handed down to the succeeding generations. Hence, the title of my presentation, “Don Antonio Valeriano: Literature as a Messenger of the Mother of God.”

While Saint Juan Diego remains the messenger of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Antonio Valeriano, through his literary work memorializing all that Saint Juan Diego had experienced during the apparitions of Our Lady, participates, in a premier way, in the irreplaceable mission

Novembris 1965, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966) 823, n. 11. English translation: *Vatican Council II, Vol. 1 – The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, rev. ed., ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), pp. 756-757, no. 11.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 108.

of Saint Juan Diego. Our Lady of Guadalupe came to establish a culture of Divine Love and Mercy among her children of America and of all the world. The *Nican Mopohua* is a premier or privileged expression of the Guadalupan culture as it has continued from 1531 until today.

Who Is Antonio Valeriano?

In God's Providence, we are blessed to have a most reliable account of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a document entitled *Nican Mopohua*, written by Antonio Valeriano in Nahuatl, his native tongue and the native tongue of Saint Juan Diego. Antonio Valeriano, also Native American, was a good friend of Saint Juan Diego. He, too, had received the gift of faith and baptism. Hence, his Christian name. Sadly, we do not know his Native American name. He became a respected scholar and political leader, serving as Governor of the Native Americans of the City of Mexico for some thirty years.

Born in 1520 in Azcapotzalco, not far from Tepeyac Hill, Valeriano is said to be the nephew of the Emperor Montezuma. At the age of 16, he entered the College of the Holy Cross, the first college in the Western Hemisphere, founded in 1536 by Fray Juan de Zumárraga, the first Bishop of Mexico. The College was comparable to our high schools. He was a member of the first class of the College, graduating with honors in Latin and Greek, and, after his graduation, was retained at the College to teach these subjects. He eventually became Professor of Philosophy and served as the Dean of the College for 20 years. He was much esteemed by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún.

It is important to say something about Fray Bernardino because of his influence in the formation of Antonio Valeriano. Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590) was a Franciscan friar who, from 1529 until his death, participated in the evangelization of what is today the nation of Mexico. He is especially known for his work in ethnography, the study of cultures, in this case, of the Native American or Aztec culture in Mexico. He learned Nahuatl, the language of the Native Americans and studied carefully the Aztec religion, culture, and history. Being primarily a missionary, while at the same time an eminent scientist, he translated the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Catechism into Nahuatl.

Fray Bernardino is still known and revered today for his compilation, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* (*General History of the Things of New Spain*). The most famous extant manuscript of the work is called the *Florentine Codex*. It is a bilingual – Spanish and Nahuatl – work which is greatly enriched by the illustrations provided by native artists. A twelve-volume work, it provides a complete documentation of the Aztec history and culture. The last or twelfth volume gives an account of the conquest of Mexico. Fray Bernardino's

esteem of Antonio Valeriano is an indication of Valeriano's exceptional qualities as a brilliant scholar, while, at the same time, a brilliant public servant.

Antonio Valeriano was an intimate friend of Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, Juan Bernardino, and Juan Diego. He was blessed to hear his friend Juan Diego recount many times the wonderful story of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe. It is important to recall that, from the time of the apparitions, Juan Diego devoted the rest of his life to the work of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Once the chapel had been built, as Our Lady requested of Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, and the tilma was installed there, Juan Diego made his home near the chapel, at which he continued to be Our Lady's faithful messenger until his death some 17 years later. It is impressive to note that the chapel was completed on December 26, 1531, just two weeks after the final apparition of Our Lady. Dr. Charles Wahlig, who studied deeply the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe tells us:

On December 26th, only two weeks after the Sacred Icon appeared on Juan Diego's tilma, Spaniards and the Mexicans, working shoulder to shoulder, completed a chapel at the foot of Tepeyac Hill to house the Sacred Image. Fray Juan de Zumárraga, Bishop of Mexico, put Juan Diego in complete charge of the chapel and the Sacred Image. We can imagine that the bishop was confident that there was no more capable and worthy a person than Juan Diego to remain guardian of the world's greatest treasure.³

Saint Juan Diego died in 1548 at the age of 74. From the time of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe, he had devoted his full time to recounting to pilgrims the wonders of the apparitions.

Gifted with scholarship, Antonio Valeriano carefully recorded what Juan Diego had reported so faithfully regarding the Virgin of Guadalupe. It is said that Antonio Valeriano frequently visited with Saint Juan Diego at Our Lady's chapel.

As I mentioned, Antonio Valeriano was also a friend of Juan Bernardino, Juan Diego's uncle, and of Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, who would have been easily able to confirm what Juan Diego had told him. Their memories would have been especially important for the final part of the account, in which the miraculous healing of Juan Bernardino is recorded, including Our Lady's indication to him of the name by which she wished to be called in this apparition:

³ Charles Wahlig, "Juan Diego: Ambassador of the Queen of Heaven," in *A Handbook on Guadalupe* (New Bedford, MA: Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, 1997), p. 46.

“THE PERFECT VIRGIN, SAINT MARY OF GUADALUPE.”⁴ Regarding Antonio Valeriano, Dr. Charles Wahling writes:

Valeriano was an intimate friend of all the principal characters in the miracle of Guadalupe: Bishop Zumárraga, Juan Gonzalez, Juan Bernardino, and Juan Diego. According to tradition, he was especially friendly with Juan Diego, and often went to visit him at the chapel in Tepeyac where the Sacred Image of Our Lady was venerated. Most of the historians agree that Valeriano carefully and accurately wrote down the conversations between Juan Diego and the Blessed Virgin, and all the other essential details of the great event as well. It is said that Valeriano enjoyed reciting the story of the miracle whenever he had an audience, which left a strong oral tradition of the miracle.⁵

Divine Providence was wonderfully at work in the friendship of Antonio Valeriano with Saint Juan Diego and in his devotion to the Virgin Mother of God under her title of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

What Is the *Nican Mopohua*?

The title of Antonio Valeriano’s account, *Nican Mopohua*, is, in fact, the first two words of the account, namely, “Here is told.”⁶ The full title reads:

Here is told and set down in order how a short time ago the Perfect Virgin Holy Mary Mother of God, our Queen, miraculously appeared on the Tepeyac, “nose of the hill,” widely known as Guadalupe. First she caused herself to be seen by an Indian named Juan Diego, poor but worthy of respect; and then her precious and beloved image appeared before the recently named bishop, Don Fray Juan de Zumárraga.⁷

These opening words set forth clearly the program of the work. It is an account of events known

⁴ “LA PERFECTA VIRGEN SANTA MARÍA DE GUADALUPE.” “Apendice A, *El Nican Mopohua*,” in Carl A. Anderson y Mons. Eduardo Chávez, *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. Madre de la civilización del amor* (México, DF: Random House Mondadori, S.A. de C.V., 2010), p. 225, n. 208. [NM]. English translation: “Appendix A – *The Nican Mopohua*,” in Carl Anderson and Eduardo Chávez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Mother of the Civilization of Love* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), p. 183, no. 208. [NMEng].

⁵ Charles Wahling, “First Author of Historic Account on Guadalupe: Don Antonio Valeriano,” in *A Handbook on Guadalupe* (New Bedford, MA: Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, 1997), p. 52.

⁶ “Aquí se narra.” NM, p. 212. English translation: NMEng, p. 172.

⁷ “Aquí se narra, se conjunta, cómo hace poco, de manera portentosa, se apareció la perfecta Virgen Santa María Madre de Dios, nuestra Reina, allá en el Tepeyac, nariz del monte, de renombre Guadalupe. Primero se dignó dejarse ver de un indito, su nombre Juan Diego; y después se apareció su preciosa y amada Imagen delante del recién electo obispo don fray Juan de Zumárraga.” NM, p. 212. English translation: NMEng, p. 172.

through three principal witnesses, Saint Juan Diego, Juan Bernardino, and Bishop Juan de Zumárraga. In fact, the text is marked by its linear character and the originality of its language.

In the presentation of the *Nican Mopohua*, in both Spanish and English, found in the book of the then Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus Carl E. Anderson and Monsignor Eduardo Chávez – one of the most recognized experts on Our Lady of Guadalupe, Postulator of the Cause of Saint Juan Diego, Co-Founder and Dean of the Instituto Superior de Estudios Guadalupanos, and Honorary Canon of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe – , *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. Madre de la civilización del amor (Our Lady of Guadalupe: Mother of the Civilization of Love)*, we read:

Textually, the account contains a mixture of both Spanish and Náhuatl idioms and expressions characteristic of the time. Notably, the indigenous elements appear in how the narrative and dialogue between Juan Diego and the Virgin reflect the high forms of indigenous speech, the *huehuetlahtolli*, the speech of the elders. As the Náhuatl scholar Miguel León-Portilla notes, this suggests that the author was familiar with ancient Indian rhetoric and songs. Náhuatl rhetoric in the account includes the frequent use of poetic phrases (such as “your face, your heart” to mean “your person”), the unique expressions of honor through both titles of rank and diminutive titles of affection (such as “My Mistress, my Lady, my Queen, my littlest Daughter, my little Girl”), and multiple phrases to compound an idea, creating a cascade of images (such as when Juan Diego approaches the beautified Tepeyac hill, saying, “By any chance am I worthy, have I deserved what I hear? Perhaps I am only dreaming it? Perhaps I’m only dozing? Where am I? Where do I find myself?”). Although this form of speech may seem archaic to our ears, it has been retained in translation to give the reader the chance to experience naturally the rhetorical ebb and flow.⁸

⁸ “El texto presenta una mezcla de los idiomas náhuatl y español, y expresiones características de la época. Llama la atención que los elementos indígenas se manifiestan en la manera en que la narrativa y el diálogo entre Juan Diego y la Virgen reflejan las formas elevadas del lenguaje indígena, el *huehuetlahtolli* o discurso de los ancestros. Como señala el erudito Miguel León-Portilla, esto sugiere que el autor estaba familiarizado con la retórica y los cantos antiguos de los indios. La retórica náhuatl se manifiesta en el relato en el uso frecuente de frases poéticas (como “tu cara, tu corazón” para referirse a “tu persona”), las singulares expresiones de respeto mediante títulos de rango y denominaciones de afecto en diminutivo (como “Señora mía, Reina mía, muchachita mía”), y frases múltiples que conforman una idea, lo que da lugar a una cascada de imágenes (como cuando Juan Diego ve el Tepeyac transformado y dice: “¿Por ventura soy digno, soy merecedor de lo que escucho? ¿Tal vez estoy sólo soñando? ¿Quizá solamente lo veo como entre sueños? ¿Dónde estoy? ¿Dónde me veo?”). Aunque esta manera

Although readers will find some of the language unusual, once they have understood the form of the literature, it will open for them the profound truths conveyed.

Regarding the *Nican Mopohua*, Dr. Charles Wahlig wrote:

It is very edifying for the human race to have in its midst a perpetual miracle brought from the unseen world into the world of physical reality, but what is its purpose and meaning? That is the vital part, so we must be very certain about the words spoken by Our Lady to Juan Diego and Juan Bernardino. In a certain sense these, together with the message in the Sacred Image itself, are for Guadalupe what the Bible is to the foundations of Christianity.

The more one thinks about it, the clearer it becomes that the Blessed Virgin Mary could hardly have selected two men more suitable for her purposes: Juan Diego, the virtuous one, worthy to receive her message, and Don Antonio Valeriano, the Mexican of great intellect and gifted writing talent for transmitting her words to posterity.⁹

The introduction to the translation of the *Nican Mopohua* from Nahuatl into Spanish by Father Mario Rojas Sánchez, one of the noted scholars on the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe, also underlined the clear presence of Divine Providence in the writing of the *Nican Mopohua*. The introduction comments on two theories regarding the origin of the document.

The first theory is that it is the fruit of the study of indigenous scholars working in a commission under the direction of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, and the second theory, which seems more credible to me, is that it is the fruit of the many encounters of Antonio Valeriano and Saint Juan Diego, during which Saint Juan Diego recounted the apparitions of Our Lady at Tepeyac Hill. The analysis concludes: "Be what may of these observations, all agree in recognizing a depth of supernatural help in this account of the Guadalupan Miracle, to the degree that the most serious scholars call it 'The Gospel of Mexico' and its author 'The Evangelist of the Apparitions'."¹⁰

de hablar puede parecer arcaica, se ha conservado en la traducción para da al lector la oportunidad de experimentar naturalmente el vaivén retórico." NM, pp. 211-212. English translation: NMEng, pp. 171-172.

⁹ Charles Wahlig, "First Author of Historic Account on Guadalupe: Don Antonio Valeriano," in *A Handbook on Guadalupe* (New Bedford, MA: Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, 1997), p. 54.

¹⁰ "Sea lo que fuere de estas aseveraciones, todos coinciden en reconocer un fondo de asistencia sobrenatural en esta relación del Milagro Guadalupano, en grado tal, que los más serios investigadores la llaman 'El Evangelio de México', y a su autor, 'El Evangelista de las Apariciones'." Antonio Valeriano, *Nican Mopohua (Aqui se narra)*, tr. Mario Rojas Sánchez (México, DF: Centro de Estudios Guadalupanos, AC – CEG, nd), p. 3.

Conclusion

Monsignor Eduardo Chávez in his book, *Our Lady of Guadalupe and Saint Juan Diego: The Historical Evidence*, writes:

The Guadalupan Event was the response from God to a humanly impossible situation: the relationship between the world of the Indigenous and that of the newly arrived Spaniards. The Christian Indigenous, Juan Diego, was the link between the non-Christian, old Mexican world and the Christian missionary proposition which arrived through the Hispanic mediation. The result was the enlightenment of a new Christianized people. Juan Diego was neither a Spaniard arriving with Cortés, nor a Spanish Franciscan missionary; he was a native belonging to that old world rich in culture. A sculptural group that today can be seen on the hill of Tepeyac, where we find in contemplation before Holy Mary of Guadalupe the Indigenous Juan Diego, the Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, and other men, women, and children, almost in a kind of procession contemplating Holy Mary, expresses with a strong plasticity this fact and this message. This is the particularity of the ecclesial mediation of Juan Diego, the “ambassador envoy of Holy Mary of Guadalupe,” as the *Nican Mopohua* calls him. Juan Diego was therefore the missionary of this encounter in which Christ was to become embodied in a concrete cultural humanity through the mediation of Holy Mary. One of the 12 Franciscan Apostles of Mexico, Friar Toribio Paredes de Benavente, Motolinia (Motolinia meaning “the poor man”), in one of his letters to the king of Spain saw the encounter as humanly impossible, if it were not by the work of the Grace of God. For that reason the Indigenous neophytes invoked the friars along with Virgin Mary for such a miracle. The miracle was to happen as a totally unimaginable and unexpected Grace and it would be a liberating reality.

Those two worlds, until then strangers to each other and enemies, with all premises for hatred or the fatalistic acceptance of defeat on the part of one, for the scorn or the exploitation on the part of others, for ambitions and rivalries and civil wars among all, began to recognize in Holy Mary of Guadalupe the Mother of all. She requested through Juan Diego to be constructed in that place a house, home for all. Thus the Christian faith

totally took root in the Mexican cultural world. It is the birth of the Mexican and Latin American Catholic people. Forgetting this story can always produce new ruptures and old antagonisms. Only the Christian Event can constantly illuminate a people. Guadalupe and Juan Diego remind us of this Event.¹¹

Employing his gift of writing, Antonio Valeriano produced an extraordinary work of literature, which is indeed an instrument by which the Virgin Mother of God continues to communicate her message of Divine Mercy to mankind, to the children whom Our Lord confided to her maternal care at His dying, represented by the Apostle and Evangelist Saint John who stood with the Mother of God at the foot of the Cross. As He was dying on the Cross, our Lord Jesus gave us His Mother to be our own; He said to Mary: "Woman, behold, your son!"; and He said to Saint John the Evangelist, representing the whole Church: "Behold, your mother!"¹²

In thanking God for the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe, let us thank God also for Antonio Valeriano and for his *Nican Mopohua*. By his writing, Antonio Valeriano truly shares with Saint Juan Diego the wonderful mission of Messenger of the Mother of God. At the same time, his writing reminds us of the mission of all good literature to reflect the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of God – the All True One, the All Good One, and the All Beautiful One.

Raymond Leo Cardinal BURKE

¹¹ Eduardo Chávez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe and Saint Juan Diego: The Historical Evidence*, tr. Carmen Treviño and Veronica Montaña (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), p. xxi.

¹² Jn 19, 26-27.