

## The Undocumented Virgin

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I'm Catholic. Not just a *cultural* Catholic, mind you, but a flesh-eating, blood-drinking practitioner of the faith. I beat my chest during the recitation of the confession at Mass. I cross myself whenever I pass by a church, on the plane before takeoff and landing, and always before a performance. I've got as many rosaries, bottles of holy water, crucifixes, and saints (depicted on plastic statuettes, refrigerator magnets, three-dimensional postcards) as a Mexican *abuelita* or a Dominican baseball player. Christian symbolism permeates my writing: my characters are always undergoing Christ-like crucifixions and resurrections.

My friends—the poets and performance artists, the godless neo-bohemians—they're the cultural Catholics. They laugh at my Old World ways. The Church! they scoff, the light glinting off gold crucifixes dangling just above the neckline of their shirts or from one or both ears. A genocidal institution! Priests! they say, lighting a stick of incense at their apartment altars and showing off their *Virgen de Guadalupe* T-shirts. A bunch of altar boy-molesting hypocrites!

I admit that the Catholic Church is guilty of many crimes against humanity. But, I tell my friends, there is a vast gulf between the *institution* and what I consider to be the true Rock of the Church: not the priests or the bishops or cardinals or the Pope, but the faithful in the pews. In El Salvador, it was radical Catholic laity that laid the groundwork for the revolutionary movement of the 1970s and 1980s—and, in the process, convinced key church authorities (such as martyred Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero) that acquiescence to the military dictatorship was a mortal sin. Despite the wane of Marxist-influenced liberation theology in this postsocialist era,

Catholic activists continue to be in the vanguard on issues of social justice, whether in the poverty-stricken favelas of São Paulo or on the gang-infested streets of East Los Angeles.

But it is something even bigger than politics, or what is at the heart of any meaningful politics, that is the basis for my spirituality. I am a practicing Catholic because I believe in the strength of communities of faith and, especially, in the role of ritual as a unifying force that allows people to transcend narrow individualism and reach out to the strangers who mirror our own visage: that moment of the Holy Mass when we turn to our neighbors and offer, "Peace be with you."

My Catholicism has its roots in Mexico, where my father's parents were born and lived until they came to Los Angeles as young adults. Mexico is a culturally and spiritually Catholic land: it survives its political and economic turmoil and its *mestizo* identity crisis to a great extent because the solidarity and ritual of Catholicism reunite the disparate pieces of its fragmented self. To the horror of the nativists in the United States, so is most of the Southwest now again a Catholic land—because it was once so and because recent waves of immigration have replenished its Mexican-Catholic self, especially in California.

The most visible symbol of this spiritual transfusion across the U.S.-Mexico frontier is the ubiquitousness of *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, Mexico's patron saint, on the northern side of the border. She is painted on neighborhood walls and on storefronts, emblazoned on sweatshirts and baseball caps; Her portrait hangs in living rooms and in every barrio church from East L.A. to El Paso. There's no quantifiable data on people's prayer habits, of course, but I'm certain that many more prayers are offered up to *la Virgen* by Mexican and Chicano faithful than to the Son of God. For us, *la Virgen* is at least as important a religious icon as Jesus Himself. *La Virgen* is at the center of the Mexican soul.

For Latin Americans, as for people in any colonized quarter of the globe, the legacy of the Church is bittersweet. It was the Church that arrived with the *conquistadores* and burned the last of the Náhuatl codices, erasing thereby the record of one of the world's great

cultures. But a third culture arose from the blood and ash of the Conquest, as did what is arguably a third religion—New World Catholicism. In Mexico, *la Virgen* was at the center of this spiritual death/birth.

In the end, there could have been worse matches than that of Indian America with the Catholic Crown of Spain: their religious lives before their encounter had much in common. Catholicism is both viciously hierarchical and collectivist—it is the religion's elemental contradiction. Social and political passivity is inculcated into the faithful as a form of theocratic control, but the sense of community among Catholics is also extremely powerful. The Catholic family, both the nuclear unit and the larger congregation, has survived the centuries and flourished in an incredible array of cultural settings because its public life, in its best moments, mirrors the private: there is familial warmth inside church and at home, a selfless generosity as much between strangers as between parent and child.

Pre-Columbian Indian theocracies shared in this very contradiction. Political control was achieved through the machinations of an elite priestly class that jealously guarded its power, but the Indians also developed harmonious modes of communal living: the public space was an intimate one. Catholicism's cluttered iconography of the Holy Trinity and the endless procession of the saints also resembled the Aztec spiritual world's polytheistic pantheon of deities. It was this similarity, I believe, that offered the possibility of spiritual synthesis rather than outright conquest.

The clash between the European *conquistadores* and the indigenous world of the Americas is as much a story of survival as of death. Just a few years ago, Indian communities across the continent sounded a note of discord during the quincentennial "celebration" of the "discovery" of the New World. That their voices were heard at all is tribute to the survival of Indian America. Increasingly, we come to recognize that the Conquest did not result in the complete destruction of the Indian—and that redress of the historical wrong of the Conquest doesn't require a purging of the European. The Catholic Church in Latin America is not the Church of the Vatican, nor is it entirely indigenous. It is the mestizo Church, wherein

commingle all of the Americas' cultural contradictions in an uneasy and constantly evolving tension.

The melding of Spanish Catholicism to indigenous spirituality began with the Conquest itself, in which pre-Columbian deities survived by a process that my colleague transvestite-performance artist-AIDS activist Marcus Kuiland-Nazario describes as "wearing Catholic drag." The spiritual continuum was unbroken: Guadalupe is Tonantzin, the Aztec goddess the Indians venerated on the Cerro del Tepeyac before the arrival of the Spanish. "Mother of Mexico," She is called: identifying with the Indian, not the European. Of course, Mexicans venerate Jesus and the constellation of Catholic saints as well (and there are many other cases of spiritual "transvestism" like Guadalupe's in the Americas, especially in the Afro-Caribbean Santería religion). But Guadalupe-Tonantzin was particularly powerful for Mexicans: it gave them a subversive path away from the patriarchal, Jesus-centered European Church toward an Indian, matriarchal spirituality. Would that this spiritual matriarchy were Mexico's political and economic reality as well, but alas, Guadalupe has yet to storm the halls of macho power.

Guadalupe followed Mexicans north as they settled in what was to become the southwestern United States, and she remained at their side after the Mexican-American War. A century and a half later, She continues to accompany Mexicans as they cross the border at the Rio Grande, and remains the most powerful of Chicana icons for Mexicans who've been trapped on the "other side" for generations. Guadalupe, in the end, proclaims a vast spiritual region that ignores the political demarcations that divide California and Mexico. Through Her intercession, a Mexican remains Mexican in California, an Indian remains Indian in Mexico.

Once again, there is no quantifiable data that I can point to, but my personal research shows that there has been a dramatic increase in miraculous apparitions of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* in recent years—on both sides of the border. There was the sighting a few years back of Her blurry image on the side of a modest stucco home in Watts, one of the many barrio destinations of the new immigrants in Cal-

ifornia. The TV news cameras didn't show much more than a curious play of shadow and light from a tree and the glow of a street-lamp, but thousands of faithful made the pilgrimage anyway. In a small central California town, home to thousands of migrant workers, a statue of *la Virgen* inexplicably shed tears. There is talk of *la Virgencita* luring border patrol guards down dead-end paths while the illegals cruise toward the American Dream on the other side of the arroyo. I even heard a rumor that *la Virgen's* serene countenance appeared before a crowd of hungover homeboys in Montebello, quivering in a big bowl of menudo.

It's no coincidence that She's been appearing more often lately. In times of crisis, She's always there. Today, the crisis is on both sides of the border.

The economic and political turmoil in Mexico began with the Zapatista insurrection of January 1994. Until then, the country had seemed stable enough. Six years of neo-liberalism under the regime of Carlos Salinas de Gortari had functioned in typical trickle-down fashion: the millionaires had become multimillionaires, an optimistic middle class was buying everything it could on credit, and the poor—well, the poor grew poorer (in Mexico, that's roughly half the population). NAFTA, the neo-liberals promised, would result in even greater prosperity for all.

Then, at midnight on December 31, 1993, at the very hour NAFTA went into effect, a ragtag army of mostly Mayan peasants burst onto the world stage, piercing the neo-liberal armor with a simple message: Mexico's relative prosperity was coming at the expense of the poor. In Mexico, the poorest of the poor are the Indians. The Zapatistas described NAFTA as a death sentence on the Indian countryside, where subsidized farming cooperatives lay directly in the path of international competition. Ross Perot talked of that big sucking sound of jobs lost to Mexico because of NAFTA; the Zapatistas saw it the other way around.

What's more, the Zapatistas pointed to the country's biggest existential contradiction. Postrevolutionary Mexico had fashioned for itself an identity predicated on the idea of the Aztec Nation: the governmental project of *la cultura nacional* proclaimed the Indian the cultural heart of Mexico. But the Indians, Mexico's minority culture (thirty percent of the population), didn't prosper from their

newfound status as cultural revolutionaries. The Indians were appropriated as poster children, much as environmental activists used Native Americans in the 1970s in the U.S. The Mexican Indians were depicted in Diego Rivera's grand murals, celebrated by poets and composers, and fervently studied by the anthropologists. But the Revolution of 1910 never reached the Indian countryside. In Chiapas, social conditions remained as they had for centuries: death from curable disease and malnutrition, no education to speak of, and an economic status no better than the peonage created by the Conquest.

Because of all this, the Zapatista movement, which had little military might, claimed a tremendous moral authority. The rest of Mexico—mestizo Mexico, the mixed-race sons and daughters of the Conquest—could not help but face its historical hypocrisy. The Zapatistas both confirmed the Revolution's cultural truths and challenged the corrupted (mestizo) structures that sold out the lofty ideals of social and economic equity.

After the January insurrection, a series of events pitched Mexico dangerously close to chaos, easily the most critical moment in the country since the Revolution of 1910. Presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio was assassinated at a Tijuana rally. Another top ruling party official was gunned down on the streets of Mexico City a few months later. Narco-lords fought turf wars openly on the streets of several cities in the north, which in recent years has come to resemble the lawless Old West.

California, meanwhile, was undergoing its own identity crisis. The central political conflict in the Golden State was ostensibly over illegal immigration. In November of 1994, Proposition 187 was approved by California's voters, who are so overwhelmingly white (an apartheid-like situation due to the fact that Latinos are severely underrepresented in the voting rolls).

Prop 187, if it ever beats the many lawsuits brought against it on constitutional grounds, would deny basic public benefits like education and most health services to illegal residents. There was plenty of political *déjà-vu* in the pro-187 rhetoric: too many immigrants! The same was said in the 1930s during the Great Depression, and later during the postwar recession of the 1950s; on both occasions, hundreds of thousands of Mexican workers were

deported back to Mexico. Proposition 187 was yet another chapter in California's long love/hate relationship with its Latino immigrants: loving the cheap labor, hating the natural consequence of Anglos having to share space—and a slice of the economic pie—with big Spanish-speaking, mostly Catholic families.

In the same election, voters also approved Proposition 184, the "three strikes and you're out" initiative, which mandated life prison sentences for a third felony—be it a violent crime or a check-kiting scheme. Propositions 187 and 184 are related: both target California's "people of color"—Latinos and African-Americans. Both target the working poor. Both were passed by a white middle class led by scapegoating politicians to believe that the poor and the non-white were responsible for California's economic downturn.

But 187 and 184 were about much more than immigration and crime. The real debate was over what kind of place California is to be in the twenty-first century. Anglo residents in Los Angeles regularly complain that their fair City of the Angels has been "Tijuanaized," no matter that their middle-class existence depends largely on cheap immigrant labor in agriculture, light industry, and the service sector. Anglo Californians begged the federal government to make a stand at the southern border: Keep the barbarians from breaching the Gates of Rome!

What many Californians fail to see is that the crisis in Mexico is the crisis in California, and vice versa. Mexicans are at the center of this whirlwind of history: agents of change. They are scorned on either side of the border. Chicanos and immigrants are treated like Indians in California, while in Mexico the Indians are seen as stumbling blocks to the latest neo-liberal schemes: the Indians of Mexico are treated like the Chicanos or immigrants of California.

The economic crisis in Mexico sends the Indians north; Proposition 187 seeks to send them back down south. And yet, speak to the immigrants, to the Indians, to the Chicanos, and you hear not the siege mentality of the Anglo Californian but the optimism that once characterized the Golden State. There is hope on the "other side" as the immigrant bolts past the border patrol to the dream of a better life in the North; there is hope in the sad eyes of Emiliano Zapata, standard-bearer of the revolt in Chiapas; there is hope on college campuses where a new generation of Chicano students

stage hunger strikes and marches in support of their immigrant brothers and sisters or in behalf of their own culture and causes.

On both sides of the border, she is there.

Faint murmurs: "*María . . . bendita . . . mujeres . . . fruto . . . vientre . . .*"

I am snuggled under a thick Mexican wool blanket, warm as in the womb, at my grandparents' house late at night. The whispers are my own and my grandmother's. She stands over me in her long nightgown, her black braids trailing down her back. The prayer finished, she leans down and under her breath rapidly recites another prayer, all the while blessing me with her hand. She places the cross of her thumb and index finger before my lips. I kiss it. "Amen," we say, almost in unison.

The only light in the house emanates from my grandparents' bedroom, where shadows from a wavering candle flame dance on the wall—and from the towering *Virgen de Guadalupe* that hangs above the fireplace in the living room. From beneath the cherub and sliver of dark moon that bears her aloft comes a red glow that burns night and day. I never, ever saw my grandmother replace the bulb hidden behind the green ceramic corona under the Virgin. In my childhood, it was the eternal flame, protecting me from the darkness . . . from the bitter pain in my grandparents' bedroom—the ghosts of my family's Passion—and from the chaos of the world outside.

My grandmother did everything she could to turn her house in Los Angeles into one grand Mexican-Catholic altar. There was the Last Supper in the dining room, of course, and little saintly medallions of the mail-order variety strategically placed in every room. A candle always burned before a gold-framed San Martín de Porres. But it was *la Virgen* in the living room—by sheer size, the most important icon in the house—that fascinated me. Terrified me. Could save me. Was my mother. Was His mother. And was a virgin, but that didn't mean much to me; what mattered was that from her all things came: She was the Mother of God, the Goddess, the Witch, whatever you want to call her. And best of all, she was *morena*: her olive skin, tinged with the glow of the omnipresent red light, was as dark as my own.

At Franklin Elementary School, I was the only Latino in an overwhelmingly white student body (I recall one black girl, and a smattering of Asian kids). I became a good student, despite the fact that my English was less than proficient when I entered kindergarten. But there was always the feeling that I didn't quite fit in, no matter how well I ended up speaking and writing English. It was at home that I had a more secure sense of self. At my parents' house, there was a fluid negotiation between Spanish and English, between American ambition and Latino family values, between Vicki Carr and Motown. But the space that I found the most comforting in my early childhood was my grandparents' home. *La Virgen* was the source of a precious thing in my life: the sense that no matter how many costumes I had to wear (socially, linguistically) out in the world, there was a home I could always return to, as warm as school was cold, as secure as the world was scary.

A month after the passage of Proposition 187 in California and just a few days before Christmas 1994, the new government of President Ernesto Zedillo suddenly and drastically devalued the Mexican peso, plunging the middle and working classes into a deep holiday depression. But Mexicans weathered the storm. Because of Her.

I arrived in Mexico City just a few days before the devaluation, as the famous Popocatepetl volcano was belching mammoth gray clouds of ash in a tailor-made metaphor for the country's instability. ¡Feliz Navidad!

The pilgrims come from all over the republic to celebrate her feast day on December 12, but the party begins the night before. They come as they've come for a thousand years to the Cerro del Tepeyac. The pilgrims come by bus, car, or bicycle. Yet others come jogging or walking from distances greater than the Greek marathon, carrying banners and picture frames and heavy ornate wooden altars, all bearing her image.

A mostly brown nation of Indian and mixed-race heritage assembles on the lava stone before the basilica. Their hair is neo-hippie long or punk short—mestizo kids from the city, *indígenas* from the provinces. I came expecting to see a lot of grandmothers

with crinkled faces and long white braids, but mostly the pilgrims are young: teenage rocker types in leather jackets carrying ghetto blasters with stickers of Metallica and Nirvana right next to *la Virgen's*.

It's a Catholic Woodstock attended, according to official crowd estimates, by some four million faithful every year. The biking pilgrims park tens of thousands of machines on top of one another, ceremonial piles of aluminum and rubber. The pilgrims drink, a little rum or brandy to ward off the chill of the night and—why not?—to toast *la Virgencita*. The pilgrims smoke, too. A crew of *rockero* youth at the top of Tepeyac pass the pipe around and listen to Pink Floyd on a battered box. *La Virgen* doesn't suffer from any generation gap.

It's the biggest party I've ever been to. My street paranoia fades as I realize that this is probably the safest place on the planet to be: who would dare diss Lupe by committing the sin of robbery? (Police reported that there was a grand total of seven arrests during the entire festival.) There is virtually no security, except for a few Red Cross crews with stretchers and ambulances at the ready for those who pass out in the crush of the crowd. The few cops are in an uncharacteristically jovial mood (cops are hated in Mexico City as much as they are in the barrios of Rodney King's L.A.). They while away the hours by taking pictures of themselves at Technicolor-bright Polaroid altars depicting *la Virgen's* apparition and munching on traditional egg-and-nut breads along with everyone else.

After two in the morning, the chill grows bitter and the party energy flags. The thousands of faithful turn in for the night: the marathon runners from Hidalgo, the Marian devotees from Morelos, the Indian dancers from Oaxaca, the young former drug addicts-turned-missionaries from Tijuana. They lay out their blankets and huddle together against the cold. It's as if the entire country is in one huge embrace; Mexico hugs itself through the night to keep warm.

This is the greatness of mestizo culture, I think to myself. Everyone's welcome; we can all get along. Because of *her*. Because She is both Indian and Spanish. A rocker and an Aztec dancer. She's olive-skinned, a blend of indigenous copper brown and Iberian white. She's the woman that puts the Mexican macho in his place—

no matter how much he beats his chest, she's the origin of All Things, the serpent-woman Tonantzin.

She is the protector of Family, and lashes out at anyone who would endanger a child's well-being. She is, after all, the Savior's Mother and sees her Son's visage in the face of every Mexican son or daughter. Perhaps that's why most of the pilgrims are so young. It is young Mexico that stares into a bleak future, a violent world, that is looking for itself today in the jungles of Chiapas, along the endless asphalt of Mexico City and in the cold cities of the United States. Young Mexico desperately needs to believe.

Skyrockets burst in the predawn sky as I climb the Cerro del Tepeyac. A tearful nostalgia overwhelms me: I am returning to my grandmother's home country, where she bought that big, beautiful portrait of Her. I'm the prodigal son born in the North returning to wrap myself in the gentle folds of Tepeyac. It's okay that my Spanish isn't perfect, that I eat hamburgers and love rock 'n' roll. All *la Virgen* asks of me is faith.

And I do believe: more in her than in the politics of the country whose passport I bear, the good ol' U.S.A. This is my first December 12 in Mexico City, and it is both a political and an existential pilgrimage. I'm a mestizo twice over: Indian and European blood runs through my veins, plus I was born on the "other side," where my cultural icons, in addition to *la Virgen*, included *Soul Train*, *The Brady Bunch*, and later, the Beat poets, rock 'n' roll, and rap. So I've "returned" to Mexico not so much to "remember" who I am as to acknowledge my present and seek a future. In *la Virgen*, I see myself. Call Her the first mestiza, the original Chicana. And because she crosses so many borders—walls erected and kept in place by American nativists and Mexican nationalists who refuse to see we already live in a borderless time—call Her the Undocumented Virgin.

Beginning at dawn on the twelfth, thousands of Indian dancers pound the lava stone of the plaza with their bare feet amid clouds of incense. The fierce beat of the drums melds with the church hymns emanating from the cathedral. Pilgrims painfully approach the entryway on their knees, rosaries swinging from their hands, sweat streaming from their brows. I watch one man inch his way

toward *la Virgen's* birthplace carrying his sick child in his arms. Mexico comes to Her to heal itself.

We come to pay Her tribute, and to petition her as well, the tradition of the *mandas*. I speak to a family that's come all the way from East Los Angeles to honor Her. "I want to ask Her for better luck with work in the North," the teenage son, a longhaired rocker, tells me. "And for Her to accompany all Latinos in California now that they've passed 187," adds the father.

I have faith that Mexico will survive this turbulent time with its essence intact. That essence is the festival of *la Virgen*, where all of Mexico's children come together to admit that the very pain of our history—the racism against the Indian, the diaspora and conflict of immigration—is what offers us the path toward redemption. It is a hope that brings with it a tremendous responsibility: to live up to *la Virgen's* own faith in us.

The Mexican-ness of *la Virgen's* festival would probably be misunderstood in the United States. More than ever, Americans cling to their individual "space"; their generosity grows fickle. A feast like *la Virgen's* would appear claustrophobic, dirty, anarchic. And yet, what Americans misunderstand about Mexicans is precisely what they need the most. Americans need to embrace themselves. I've found in Mexico, through Guadalupe-Tonantzin, what I'd lost in Prop 187, three-strikes-you're-out California.

As the sun sinks into the coppery hues of the smoggy horizon of the most populous city on earth, the festivities of Mexico's most important holiday draw to a close. The Indian elders leave the cathedral, chanting in the Spanish of *la Virgen* and in the dialects of Tonantzin: "Adiós, *Madre de Cielo*." Good-bye, Mother of Heaven. They walk backwards, their eyes never leaving the doorway to the cathedral, as if to say that Mexico will never turn her back on Her faith.

December 1995. I wanted to be in Mexico again this year for her day, but I got stuck in L.A. After joining the faithful at Our Lady Queen of the Angels Church downtown, however, I hardly missed Mexico at all.

I get to the church at about four-thirty in the morning, one of the late arrivals for the traditional *mañanitas*, *la Virgen's* birthday cel-

ibration which begins a little after midnight and lasts till sunrise. Everything I'd seen in Mexico last year is duplicated here. The mariachis sing with their dramatic vibratos and hand gestures. People kneel and pray or simply stare in reverential silence before Her image, which is everywhere. There's a portrait hanging in the church, one on a makeshift stage in the courtyard, another at an old altar said to be the site of holy apparitions. The glow from the flames of hundreds of votive candles wavers over the faces of the faithful.

And there She is again, on the necklaces, 1996 calendars, T-shirts, hawked by dozens of vendors. Here She stands at one of those kitschy makeshift photo studios. A few take the picture standing alone, but mostly it's families that gather for the memento: the grandmother with long braids and shawl, the red-eyed parents who'll have to go off to work in an hour or so, the hyper kids scampering around in a world of both magical colors and religious solemnity.

We're immersed in sight, sound, smell: tacos, tamales, hot dogs, sweet *pan dulce* bread, hot *champurrado* and *ponche* drinks. Nothing costs more than a dollar. *La Virgen*, above all, is Mother to the Working Poor. As the pastor's voice booms over the loudspeakers recounting the tale of Juan Diego's encounter with *la Virgen*, the perfume of hundreds of red roses wafts over us in the courtyard, reminding us of the miracle centuries ago: the skeptical bishop had asked Juan Diego for proof that he had indeed witnessed a miraculous apparition, and she obliged by presenting him with dozens of the beautiful flowers in the dead of winter that no rose could survive. Who could doubt the miracle? The roses live on in the middle of December, nearly five hundred years later.

It was another tough year in Mexico, and Latinos would be hard-pressed to say things were much better in the anti-immigrant North. The faithful here are almost all recently arrived, many of them are undocumented. Here in L.A., the *mandas* tell of the hardships and hopes of the immigrants.

Antonio Huanetlcóatl, the father of an Indian family from the high sierra of Puebla, asks *la Virgen* to bless this City of the Angels, for her to "bring food to the hungry, health to the sick, and peace to lands torn by war." His twenty-two-year-old son, Luis, mean-

while begs her to accompany his young wife in her pregnancy, that a healthy son or daughter might join their family. "I hope that by February she'll give birth, and I've come to ask *la Virgen* for everything to turn out all right."

Griselda Facio of Jalisco prays for a change in the government back home in Mexico, an end to the crisis and chaos in her homeland. "Things are difficult everywhere you go," she says. "I'm praying for myself and for everyone else."

Meanwhile Doris Sánchez, a Honduran immigrant in her early twenties, prays for peace right here in L.A., for an end to the urban warfare between rival gangs in her neighborhood. "I pray that people get organized" says Sánchez, "so that there isn't any more killing of innocent people."

And so *la Virgen* is called upon to cure ills north and south, for loved ones or for anyone anywhere who suffers. This gathering in L.A. might not be as monumental as the festival in Mexico City. But there is an intensity here that matches or maybe even surpasses the devotion back home. Perhaps it's the yearning to remain rooted in a rootless time where one's address can be changed by twists of fate like the economy or the border patrol.

Leonor Cervantes, a native of Guanajuato who gathered up her three sons, two daughters, mother, and a sister to be here this morning, says she feels the holiday for *la Virgen* might be more important to Mexicans here than back home. "The farther you are from home, the more She pulls at you," says Cervantes. "It's a great thing—She keeps us united, whether we're in our home country or over here."

And then I meet Rafael Torres, who looks the typical American teenager in his backwards baseball cap and baggy jeans, except that his face is just like Juan Diego's, Indian features unchanged five hundred years after the Conquest. He's made it safely to Los Angeles from his hometown of Puebla, due in no small part to *la Virgen's* guidance. "Before the immigrants come north," he says, "they go to the church right there in Mexico, to get *la Virgen's* blessing. Everybody does it. They ask Her to let them come to this country, to cross the border without any problems."

The Undocumented Virgin.

The Mother of Mexico stands at the center of the Mexican fam-

ily. She may have prodigal sons and wayward daughters, Her children might not have enough to eat sometimes, economic and political storms rage at home and abroad, but she is there, unmovable. She reminds Mexicans who they are, wherever they are. She is their very history, telling them that they have not only a millenary past, but a millenary future as well.

The Undocumented Virgin has accompanied me on my journey through life, from early innocence to my alienated teens to my dark twenties and on into the strange pilgrimage of my thirties. Today, I live across the street from my grandparents' old home. Grandfather died long ago, my *abuelita*, she who introduced me to *la Virgencita*, left us six years ago. My parents live in the house now. In a few months, they'll move away and I'll move in. The towering portrait of *la Virgen* is still there in the living room. She is there to stay, as much a part of the house as the foundation itself.

## Guadalupe, Subversive Virgin



MARGARET RANDALL

It was the unpredictable sixties, and the Pope was coming to Mexico. Serafina, who cleaned my house and lived with her extended family in the little room on its roof, harrumphed for days. She told me the priest where she sometimes confessed and took communion wanted his parishioners to contribute to the solid-gold rose the country's faithful would give this Patriarch of the Church, a gift of devotion from Catholics whose history was not as fervent as those from Colombia, not as processional as those from Peru. No one forgot the Cristero Rebellion, that searing separation of Church and State.<sup>1</sup>

Serafina laughed. "*Imagínate*," she said, "a gold rose! As if he didn't have enough gold in that Vatican of his!"

But the Virgin of Guadalupe. Ah, she was something else. "Our own. A sister in suffering." Or better yet, a benevolent Mother, of the sort few had. Serafina's own mother had kicked her out when she was fourteen—"may the Lord forgive her"—because she gave birth one day, no husband, no warning, her emaciated belly barely thickened beneath the homemade apron. "What did I know, *pues*. My mother never told me anything. That was Concha, my oldest . . . And Our Lady, she's never turned her back on me."

Me, not us. The relationship is deeply personal even when it reflects a veritable movement of collective voice. Subversion is about putting something over on a person or system that abuses

<sup>1</sup>Cristero Rebellion, 1927 to 1929. Almost two decades after the Revolution of 1910, the Mexican masses rose up in arms against the power of the Catholic Church, provoking a powerful separation of Church and State which has influenced some but not all of the other Latin American countries.