

Queen of the Americas Guild 2011 Mexico Pilgrimage

The Queen of the Americas Guild held its annual pilgrimage to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe from February 24 – March 1, 2011, attended by a spirited group of 19 pilgrims. As National Coordinator of the Guild, I was pleased to join the group for the eighth time.

After checking in at the beautiful Marriott Reforma Hotel, the group first gathered at a welcome dinner on Thursday evening. Here pilgrims learned what to expect during the trip, and were given a run-down of the tour itinerary. Bishop Joseph J. Madera joined us for dinner, and afterwards gave the group a detailed account of his personal and family history, which gave us a great understanding of his devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. On Friday morning, the group gathered in a hotel conference room to hear Bishop Madera's inspirational and informative talk about the symbolism of Our Lady's Tilma. Through words and pictures, we were led to a greater understanding of the miracle of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and after this perfect preparation, we headed to the Basilica for Mass at her shrine.

When we arrived near the Basilica, we were met with the Guild's large floral offering to Our Lady. Four of our group's strong volunteers carried the floral float up the avenue and across the Basilica's square, where we were met by Bishop Madera. After posing for a lovely group photograph, he welcomed us into the Basilica for Mass on the main altar. As we made our way up the center aisle with Our Lady's image before us, we were moved by the experience of finally being near the one true self-portrait of the Blessed Mother. After Bishop Madera had celebrated a lovely bi-lingual Mass, our pilgrims headed out with a renewed appreciation for Our Lady's miracle.

After Mass, pilgrims were led on a comprehensive tour of the Basilica area, which began with a short walk up the first steps of Tepeyac hill to view the property owned by the Guild. The group was informed of the work the Guild is doing to fulfill the wishes of Guild founder, Bishop Jerome Hastrich, to build a retreat center near Our Lady's image that will be a safe place for pilgrims to gather, stay, and be close to Our Lady.

The Basilica area tour continued with a visit to the Guadalupe Museum, which houses a priceless collection of beautiful paintings and sculptures. In celebration of Mexico's recent bicentennial, the museum was featuring a lovely new exhibit of artwork depicting Our Lady's role in Mexican history, as showcased in both contemporary and historical artworks. After a restful break and box lunch, the tour continued with visits to the other churches on the grounds, including El Pocito (church of the well), Los Indios (church of the Indians) and the old Basilica.

Next on the agenda was another site integral to the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe; the church of Santiago de Tlatelolco, where Saint Juan Diego was baptized and worshiped. Located in the Plaza of the Three Cultures, this stark and very dark church perfectly represents the type of construction used by the first Catholic converts after the conquest. Before returning to our hotel, we made a stop at Mexico's largest church, the Metropolitan Cathedral, located in the central zocalo (square) of the city. Here we visited its sixteen side chapels, as well as the main Altar of the Kings. We also

saw the entrance to the crypt of Bishop Juan de Zumarraga, first Bishop of Mexico and the Bishop to whom Juan Diego revealed Our Lady's image on his tilma. At dinner this evening, all agreed that this was the perfect way to spend the first day of the pilgrimage; learning more about the miracle of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and walking in the footsteps of Saint Juan Diego.

Saturday began with a drive toward the colonial city of Puebla, located approximately 75 miles southeast of Mexico City. Although the view of the nearby active volcano, Popocatepetl was somewhat obstructed by clouds on this day, pilgrims were still treated to spectacular views of Mexico's countryside and mountains along the way. Once in Puebla, we went straight to the beautiful Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, where again, Bishop Madera celebrated our Mass. After Mass, we were allowed a tour of the sacristy, and a tiny hidden octagonal shaped chapel, with walls virtually covered in gold leaf and beautiful paintings. This tiny chapel, hidden for centuries, is not open to the general public. Once again, the honor of having Bishop Madera as our spiritual leader allowed us this very special privilege.

After Mass, pilgrims walked to the nearby Santo Domingo church with its magnificent Rosary Chapel. This chapel, completed in 1690, is entirely covered in ornate gold leaf, tiles, and fine woodcarvings, and is one of the finest examples of Baroque style in all of Mexico. Although our visit was cut short due to a wedding that was scheduled to begin in the chapel, the sight of the beautiful bride and her loving family was a great joy to our group, and according to our guide, an extreme rarity. What a privilege it must have been to be married in this beautiful chapel! After giving his blessing to the anxious bride, Bishop Madera led us to a local restaurant where we enjoyed a festive lunch, complete with talented singers from the nearby University of Puebla. His Excellency even joined in for a few of his traditional Mexican favorites! After lunch, we moved on to the church of San Francisco where we learned the story of Blessed Sebastian de la Aparicio and viewed his incorrupt body.

On our journey back to Mexico City, we made two stops along the way. The first stop was in the charming town of Tlaxcala, where we visited the Church of San Miguel del Milagro. The Blessed Virgin appeared here to Juan Diego Bernardino and directed him to an unknown spring, flowing with miraculous curative waters. Here our pilgrims were able to gather water directly from the well.

Next on the agenda was the nearby town of Ocotlan, with its beautiful Basilica. Our Lady again presented herself to Juan Diego Bernardino here, leaving behind her image burned into the trunk of an oak tree. This image is carefully preserved on the altar in this lovely church. Here we were again treated to sights of local festivities as we witnessed two Quinceanera celebrations (the traditional Mexican celebration of a girl's 15th birthday). Seeing the girls and their families decked out in their finest again added an extra festive touch to our already joyful day.

After a long day in the sunshine and beautiful weather, pilgrims were happy to return to our hotel in Mexico City for another wonderful dinner and rest for the next day's adventure.

Sunday morning took us to Tulpetlac and the Shrine of the Fifth Apparition. It is here that Our Lady appeared to Juan Diego's uncle, Juan Bernardino, and cured him of his illness. This apparition is depicted in a large and beautiful painting that hangs above

the altar of this simple church. After Bishop Madera celebrated Mass for us here, he joined us for another group photograph on the steps of this charming church.

We then traveled to Tepotzotlan, a colonial city Northeast of Mexico City. After a delicious buffet lunch at a local restaurant, we visited the church and museum of San Francisco Javier. The museum houses one of the largest collections of religious art from the Mexican colonial era in all mediums, from carvings in ivory and wood, to paintings by Miguel Cabrera. The church itself, begun in 1670 and finished in 1682, is a magnificent example of Churrigueresque design, with the main and side altars completely covered in gold leaf.

After our church and museum visit, pilgrims were left with some free time to explore the colorful local crafts market that filled the square outside. Mariachis, dancers, and other street performers all contributed to the festive atmosphere of the warm and sunny afternoon. Later that evening, after another enjoyable dinner in the company of our new friends, some pilgrims chose to enjoy an evening out at the famous Ballet Folklórico, a study of traditional Mexican folk dances, held at the beautiful Palace of Fine Arts.

Monday morning's activities began with a visit to the charming neighborhood of Coyoacán. After a brief stop at the home of painter Frida Kahlo, we visited the beautiful church of Saint John the Baptist to view its lovely artwork. From there we moved on to the Convent of the Holy Cross, where Bishop Madera again celebrated Mass. As always, the sisters were most welcoming and gracious, and especially happy to see Bishop Madera. His Excellency enthusiastically shared the story of Venerable Conchita, whose works inspired the foundation of both the Sisters of the Cross of the Sacred Heart and the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit. A short distance away, we visited San José El Altíllulo church to view the tomb of Conchita, along with the church's beautiful stained glass window depicting the Holy Spirit. Bishop Madera had attended seminary here for a time, and his close connection with both the Sisters and the entire Coyoacán area translated into a most joyous visit for the pilgrims. We were pleased to have His Excellency join us for a wonderful lunch at a charming local restaurant, housed at a sprawling estate in Coyoacán that was once the home of Hernán Cortés.

This afternoon, after a brief stop for shopping, our group headed back to the Basilica to say goodbye to Our Lady and to thank her for the many graces she had bestowed during our pilgrimage. Free time was spent in prayerful contemplation, shopping, or for the adventurous, in a climb up Tepeyac Hill. At this point, our journey was complete; we had traveled the footsteps of St. Juan Diego, and were left with a new understanding and appreciation of Our Lady's miracle.

That evening, the group gathered with Bishop Madera for the last time for our farewell dinner. There was lively conversation between new friends, and all agreed that the pilgrimage had been a most rewarding experience. Our Lady had brought us together, and we had shared in her miracle.