In This Moment, Our Lady of Guadalupe\

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Notes for reflection on the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe:

Three points:

1. Synchretism, all over Central and South America, (catholic) shrines built on top of (indigenous) shrines. Violence done to the religions of indigenous peoples, yet something true and beautiful, too, something indelible, unchanging. Worshippers continue to come to the same place. Come to this place for a daily or weekly dose. The worship remains, changes form. The presence of the woman, the goddess, the vision of Juan Diego, Talking Eagle. Mixed together. All religion moves and grows. That’s what we’re about. Religion that lives in its time.
2. Liberation, Juan Diego as a peasant farmer, and the recipient of the vision. “I am a nobody. I am a small rope, a tiny ladder, the tail end, a leaf.” Blessed are the meek, inheritors of the Earth. Preferential option for the poor. Jesus as a champion not of the rich and powerful but of the outcasts, the oppressed, the ones on the margins. Our Lady of Guadalupe has lived as patron saint over the farm worker protests of Cesar Chavez, and today in the battle over immigration. We can use such a symbol today, in our own struggles, in our own identity.
3. Immanence, Most of the time for me God is no more than an idea. And I’m fine with that. I haven’t ever known the God that people say comes to sit down next to them, and I think now after all these years I would have more than a few questions about my own sanity if she did. I find great strength and purpose in my humanist religion. It speaks to me in words that I can hear. I believe religion creates meaning for all of us, regardless of the languages we use. And as for my particular dialect, I would not ever give it up.

But I have experienced something similar to Gen in another cathedral in Guatemala, where Maya worshippers knelt before a statue of the Christ, a crucifix flanked by candles. Here’s what I wrote after that trip in 2011.

“A few women kneel and pray in front of the figure. Another circles behind, touching the figure’s calves, his shins, tender, hoping, loving. On his knees to my right is a man, hands pursed together, carrying a few items of native weaving that betray him as Maya, dirty, worn out, with such a look of supreme supplication as I have never seen, a man whose whole being I thought was pouring out in that moment, who barely knew I was there, who was fully alive in his emotion, just him and his prayers. These were real Maya, people I had been reading about, people suffering from four decades of genocide at the hands of their own government, people whose beliefs and livelihoods are connected in a way that I can only imagine. People for whom each day is another example of how God feeds the birds of the air and clothes them. Or not. And it hit me in that moment that Jesus suffering on the cross is separated from these people by less than a few years, maybe less than a few hours, maybe not even in this moment. The agony of dying with nails through your hands and your lungs collapsing into your abdomen is no abstract idea. The cross is no ancient symbol. These are people who have been hacked by machetes and thrown into wells to die in a pile of the mortally wounded. These are people who have been burned alive in the very churches where they sought safety. People whose children have been brutalized unspeakably. These people KNOW Jesus. He lives with them.”

As for Mary appearing in person to someone 500 years ago, and the magical image that appeared on his cloak, I don’t know about that. Outside my experience. But I do know about things like finding roses blooming, strangely, in the winter, and finding holiness in that moment. This is what we’re about, too. About finding truth and meaning in this moment, in the night sky, or the harsh cries of wild geese, or in these roses.