CHAPTER ONE

From the Beginning

In 1648 a Mexican priest named Miguel Sánchez published a book titled *Imagen de la Virgen Maria, Madre de Dios de Gvadalvpe, milagrosamente aparecida en la civdad de Mexico* . . . (Image of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God of Guadalupe, Who Appeared Miraculously in the City of Mexico . . .).[1] This was the first known account of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In it he described how at the beginning of December 1531 the Virgin Mary appeared to a neophyte native named Juan Diego at the hill of Tepeyac outside Mexico City and ordered him to go to the bishop of Mexico, the Franciscan Juan de Zumárraga, with a message that he should build a church to her at that site.[2] He did as he was directed, but Sánchez did not describe their meeting. Juan Diego returned to Tepeyac, where he encountered the Virgin again and spoke to her with Baroque imagery. "Señora and my mother, I obeyed your command, not without effort did I enter to visit the bishop, at whose feet I knelt. He received me kindly, he blessed me lovingly, he heard me attentively, and answered me lukewarmly, saying, 'Son, on another day, when it is convenient, you can come, I will hear you more at length for your claim and I will learn at the root what your embassy is.'"[3] Juan Diego asked her to send someone else who would have more credibility. She refused, saying that her message was for the humble and directed him to return to Zumárraga on the following day.

Sánchez did not describe Juan Diego's second interview with Zumárraga. Rather, he had the native relate it to the Virgin during the third apparition. This time, Juan Diego described the bishop as being somewhat severe and abrupt. The Virgin promised that she would give a sign that would cause Juan Diego to be believed. The bishop, however, had ordered

some of his servants to follow the native to see where he went and to whom he spoke. Juan Diego disappeared from view at the bridge at Tepeyac, and they returned full of anger and ready to discredit him with Zumárraga.

On the following day, Juan Diego was supposed to return to Tepeyac to receive a sign for the bishop but was unable to do so. His uncle was dying of *cocolistli*, a generic term for illness, whose precise meaning in this context is unclear. A physician had applied medicines but to no avail. So on this, the third day after the first apparition, Juan Diego set out for Tlatelolco to find a friar to minister to his uncle.

On coming to Tepeyac he attempted to take a different route so that the Virgin would not meet or detain him. Nevertheless, she saw him from the top of the hill and came down to intercept him. He knelt before her and wished her good morning. She assured him that he need not fear for his uncle, since he was already cured. He asked her for a sign to carry to the bishop, and she directed him to go to the top of the hill and collect the flowers that he would find there. As he did so, "instantly there appeared before his eyes diverse flowers, blooming by a miracle, born by a prodigy, uncovered by a portent, the roses inviting with their beauty, the lilies offering tribute of milk, the carnations blood, the violets ardor, the jasmines amber, the rosemary hope, the iris love, the broom captivity, rivaling each other eagerly and, seemingly, speaking to his hands, not only in order that he would cut them but that he would prefer them and with secret impulses divining the glory for which they were being cut."[4] He collected the flowers in his mantle and brought them to the Virgin, who took them and then returned them to Juan Diego with instructions that he was to show them to no one but the bishop.

Juan Diego returned to the bishop's palace, where he was delayed by Zumárraga's servants, who were still angry with him. After a long wait, the attendants, aware that he carried something in his mantle, attempted to see what it was. Juan Diego was unable to prevent them, but when they attempted to take some of the flowers, which Sánchez now called roses, they found them to be painted or embroidered. When he was finally admitted into the bishop's presence, Juan Diego related all that had happened. He then opened his mantle, and the many kinds of flowers fell to the floor. Imprinted on the mantle was the picture of the Virgin, "which today is preserved, kept, and venerated in her sanctuary of *Guadalupe* of Mexico."[5] All looked on it "in ecstasy astonished, in astonishment bewildered, in bewilderment lifted up, in lifting up stirred, in stirring entranced, in entrancement contemplative, in contemplation sweetened, in sweetness joyful, in joy mute."[6]

The bishop removed the mantle from Juan Diego and took it to his

private oratory. He arranged that the native would return to Tepeyac together with others in order to point out the site for the sanctuary. Then they went to Juan Diego's town (whose name Sánchez did not give), where they found his uncle, whose name Sánchez gave for the first time as Juan Bernardino, totally cured. The Virgin had appeared to him and restored his health. It was to him, not Juan Diego, that she revealed that the sanctuary was to be called Guadalupe. Zumárraga hastened to have an *ermita*, or chapel of ease, built on the spot. In the meantime, the image was put on display in the Cathedral. After consulting both the ecclesiastical and civil *cabildos*, Zumárraga designated the Tuesday after Christmas, a scant two weeks after the appearance of the image, for a solemn procession and installation of the mantle in the *ermita*.[7] Juan Diego asked permission to live at the *ermita* as its guardian, and this was granted. He died there in 1548. Sánchez included in his account a description of the image and of the *ermita*, together with a series of miracle stories.[8]

The book was written in a florid style typical of the Baroque, filled with exaggerated conceits and contorted figures of speech, as the quotations given above abundantly show. Juan Diego's speeches to the Virgin were long and elaborate. Like the story itself, they were European in form and structure. They showed no signs of a Nahuatl substratum, something that one would expect if Sánchez had been working from an oral tradition. The *Imagen* was also characterized by an extravagant *criollismo*, which saw the people of Mexico as a new chosen people and Mexico City as a new Jerusalem. Though it would seem natural that the indigenous peoples were the special objects of the Virgin's love, they played little or no role in Sánchez's book. The story of the apparitions originated with him, and from it came the controversy that has swirled around the devotion to the present day.

Laso de la Vega and the Nican mopohua

In 1649, a mere six months after the publication of Sánchez's work, the vicar of Guadalupe, Luis Laso de la Vega, published a somewhat different account in Nahuatl (Aztec), with the Indians as the intended audience. It bore the title *Huei tlamahuiçoltica* . . . (By a Great Miracle . . .), and in addition to the apparition account contained prayers, exhortations, a life of Juan Diego, a description of the image, and a series of miracle stories.[9] The actual narration of the apparitions is now known by its opening words, "Nican mopohua" (Here is recounted). Though Laso de la Vega retained the basic European form of the apparition genre, his account was

more native in style and expression. Juan Diego's dialogues with the Virgin now reflected formal Nahuatl speech, including polite inversions and expressions of self-deprecation. Other native elements included the description of the hill on which the Virgin was standing and Juan Diego's wonderment at what he heard and saw: "Where am I? Where do I find myself? Am I just dreaming it? Am I imagining it in sleepwalking? Is it in the land of the flowers, the land of plentiful crops, the place of which our ancient forefathers used to speak? Is this the land of heaven?"[10] Laso de la Vega departed in other ways from Sánchez: his account omitted one apparition, when Juan Diego returned to the Virgin after the initial interview with Zumárraga; and Sánchez had seven miracle stories, whereas Laso de la Vega had fourteen.

There are two key questions about the *Nican mopohua*. First, was Laso de la Vega truly the author or was he merely publishing a much earlier native account? He clearly stated four times in his introduction that he was the author of the apparition account, and he made no reference to either written documents or published works, including Sánchez's. A recent study by three scholars has come down strongly on the side of unitary authorship.[11] He was, however, most probably helped by native assistants. The *Nican mopohua* shows no signs of being a translation from Spanish, whereas the miracle stories (the *Nican motecpana*, "Here is an orderly account") show every sign of a Spanish original. The second question is: Was Sánchez's account based on Laso de la Vega's, or vice versa? Those who wish to give the *Nican mopohua* pride of place see it as the basis of Sánchez's account. This cannot be proven, and certainly the *Imagen* shows no sign of being a translation of a Nahuatl original. Though the probability favors Sánchez's account as being the original one, the question cannot be definitively resolved at this time.

One thing that is clear about both accounts is that they were not based on any documentary evidence. Sánchez gave only the vaguest description of his sources. In the prologue to his book he admitted that he had been unable to find documentary proof for the apparition story, though he had searched through various archives and repositories. Finally, he had recourse to the memories of older people, especially natives, which he cited in a rather vague way as the source or proof of the truth of what he was writing.[12] Sánchez laid the groundwork for two consistent themes that have run through the Guadalupe tradition down to the present day: the lack of any clear documentary evidence for the apparitions, and the appeal to an unwritten tradition dating back to the year 1531. In a real sense, the controversy over the authenticity of the Guadalupe apparitions began with the work that first made them known.

Sánchez's contemporaries, including Laso de la Vega, Juan de Poblete,

Francisco de Siles, Antonio de Lara Mogrovejo, Pedro de Rozas, and Antonio de Robles, all testified to the fact that the story of the apparitions had been unknown or forgotten in Mexico prior to 1648.[13] Writing in the following century, Gutiérrez Dávila expressed surprise that such a great event could have been forgotten. "The forgetting of such a great benefit that the Empress of Heaven did for our America, and especially for Mexico, was certainly something worthy to be pondered."[14] In 1666 Sánchez claimed that a paper shortage in New Spain had caused the theft of many documents from the archdiocesan archive, including those that dealt with Guadalupe. There was, indeed, a paper shortage in New Spain about the year 1621, but there is no record of the extremities that Sánchez mentioned.[15] Similarly, Laso de la Vega was clear that he did not have any written sources from which he drew his account. He declared, "But a great deal has been left out, which time has erased and no one at all remembers any more, because the ancients did not take care to write it down when it happened."[16]

Though the lack of written evidence caused difficulties from the very beginning, there is no evidence at this time of overt doubts about the historical reality of the apparitions. These can be inferred, however, from the repeated attempts of apologists to find a solid basis that would render the account impervious to historical criticism, specifically, a long-standing oral tradition. The first serious attempt at confirming such a tradition was made by the Cathedral chapter of Mexico in 1665–66. During a period when it was ruling the archdiocese in the absence of an archbishop, it decided to ask the Holy See to have December 12 declared a feast day for all New Spain and that the feast have its own proper mass and office. To lay the basis for this request, the chapter ordered an inquiry.[17] The officials of the inquiry were appointed in December 1665 and a detailed questionnaire was drawn up. The investigators questioned twenty witnesses: one mestizo and seven Indians from the town of Cuauhtitlán (named by Laso de la Vega as Juan Diego's hometown), ten Spanish clerics and religious, and two Spanish laypersons. All the witness statements agreed on the existence of a tradition that went back through many generations, testifying to the reality of the apparition story. The testimonies were forwarded to Rome together with other supporting documents, but the entire case went into the limbo of Vatican bureaucracy.

At first reading, the testimonies given in the inquiry seem quite persuasive, a fact that has made this investigation of major importance to apologists for the apparitions. They were marred, however, by a number of inconsistencies and anachronisms that seriously weakened their credibility.[18] More important was the fact that the inquiry was not an examination into the truth or falsity of the apparitions, nor an investigation of

the existence or non-existence of an historical fact. On the contrary, the truth of the apparitions was presupposed. All of those involved in the inquiry were enthusiastic *guadalupanos*. The purpose was to seek evidence that would persuade the Holy See to grant the request for a proper feast day and mass and office. It was not, therefore, an objective investigation. It appears not to have persuaded officials in Rome, because for the next century they showed a decided reluctance to grant any privileged status to the Guadalupe devotion.

One important result of the inquiry was the testimony of a key witness, Luis Becerra Tanco, a diocesan cleric and a learned man who was also an expert in Nahuatl.[19] He submitted his testimony in writing and later in that same year of 1666 published it under the title of *Origen milagroso del santuario de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* (Miraculous Origin of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe).[20] Shortly thereafter he revised the work but was unable to have it published for lack of money. In 1675, through the agency of a friend, it was published posthumously in Spain under the title *Felicidad de México* (Mexico's Happiness)[21] and republished in 1685 and 1745. The two versions contained substantial variations.[22] His two works were the first true apologias for the Guadalupan apparitions.

Becerra Tanco admitted the lack of any contemporary documents that corroborated the apparition story. He attributed this to the fact that in 1531 there was no diocesan archive and because of the general disdain that peninsular Spaniards had for anything that came from the Indies. For him, the strongest proof of the authenticity of the account was in the constant tradition handed down from father to son. It is significant, however, that he admitted that there was no explanation of how the tradition had been transmitted, since "neither one [Sánchez or Laso de la Vega] explained the way in which it was ascertained or how this information came down to us."[23] Despite his assertion about the lack of documentary evidence, Becerra Tanco claimed to have seen indigenous maps and pictures that depicted the miracle. Even more, he went beyond the reliance on an unwritten tradition and was the first to claim the existence of a written account of the apparitions in Nahuatl. The descriptions he gave in the two versions of his work were somewhat different. In his testimony of 1666, Becerro Tanco spoke of

> . . . a notebook written in the letters of our alphabet in the hand of an Indian, in which were described the four apparitions of the Most Holy Virgin to the Indian Juan Diego and the fifth to his uncle Juan Bernardino. It was the one that was published in the Mexican language in 1649 by order of Licenciado Luis Laso de la Vega, vicar of the sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe.[24]

But in *Felicidad de México*, published in 1675, he wrote:

> [Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl] had in his possession a notebook written in the letters of our alphabet in the Mexican language, in the hand of an Indian who was one of the earliest graduates of the Colegio de Santa Cruz, which was mentioned above, in which reference is made to the four apparitions of the Holy Virgin to the Indian Juan Diego and the fifth to his uncle Juan Bernardino.[25]

The two variations are that, in the revised work, (1) the author was identified as a graduate of the Franciscan school at Tlatelolco, and (2) Becerra Tanco suppressed the identification of this Nahuatl document with the *Nican mopohua*. It is not clear why, though it can be surmised that as a student of Nahuatl he knew that the two documents were not the same. Four points should be noted about this now unknown Nahuatl account: (1) Becerra Tanco did not give the name of the author of this account in either version of his book; (2) he moved away from identifying it with the *Nican mopohua*; (3) he gave the document a Franciscan provenance at a time when the Franciscans were known to be hostile to Guadalupe; (4) he did not identify it as the one that he used in his own narration of the apparitions earlier in both works. At the same time, his assertion concerning this account laid the groundwork for the present-day claim that a native composed the *Nican mopohua* and that it was nearly contemporaneous with the events it narrated.

Francisco de Florencia

The problem of written sources was approached again by the next apologist for the apparitions, the Jesuit Francisco de Florencia (1619/1620–1695), in his book *La estrella del norte de Mexico* . . . (The North Star of Mexico), published in 1688.[26] It was the most complete apologia for Guadalupe up to that time and has continued to be influential down to the present day. Florencia garnered all the information that he could concerning the apparition account and the miracles worked by the image, with the result that his work is often repetitious and ill organized. His historical approach was that of the Baroque in New Spain—traditionalist, moralistic, and uncritical. Thus, he was going against a growing tendency in Catholic historiography, represented by the Benedictines of Saint-Maur (especially Jean Mabillon) and the Jesuits of the Bollandists, who were more critical and skeptical of traditional devotions and demanded evidence for their authenticity.

Like others, Florencia attempted to compensate for the lack of documentation, both by insistence on a constant tradition and by appealing to

now unknown native accounts. In an introductory letter to the book, the bachelor Jerónimo de Valladolid admitted the lack of official documentation. "No authentic document on this holy image is to be found among the official papers of this holy church [the Cathedral] of Mexico."[27] Because of the lack of written sources, he emphasized that the existence and preservation of the image were testimony enough. Documents, therefore, were unnecessary. Thus, he introduced a third argument into the armory of the apologists. The first censor of the book, Antonio de Gama, emphasized tradition as compensating for the weakness of the human memory.[28] "For our ancestors evidence was the clearest testimony of these signs, just as tradition is for us. And so it seems that it was not just human carelessness, but also the foresight of divine providence that for us the only proof of those signs should be tradition, which, supported by the fragility of our memory, should serve continually to awaken our distrust of its forgetfulness."[29] The second censor, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, echoed this theme: "The fact that we do not know how we possess such a sovereign wonder is the result of our innate carelessness . . . and after so many years what by the lack of individual notices is made known to the world with such clarity that only among the pusillanimous may it be considered doubtful."[30]

Despite these clear assertions, Florencia attempted to show that there were authentic documents that proved the historicity of the apparitions. He described two different Nahuatl accounts of Guadalupe, but his descriptions have created as many problems as they attempted to solve. In addition, his writing on this subject was rather confused. The first of these native accounts was entitled *Relación de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, of which a Spanish paraphrase had been lent to him by Sigüenza y Góngora. Florencia believed that it had come from some very ancient papers of an Indian and that it had been translated from Nahuatl by the native scholar Alva Ixtlilxochitl. He estimated the translation to be at least seventy or eighty years old and the original Nahuatl to be about one hundred.

Florencia gave numerous quotations from the *Relación* and cited some of the data given in it. Regarding the celibate marriage of Juan Diego and María Lucía (the name traditionally given to his wife) and his subsequent widowhood, Florencia quoted the author of the document as saying, "He was a widower two years before God and his Most Holy Mother chose him for such a singular task. His wife, whose name was María Luisa [*sic*], had died. He had no children because according to what I learned through many inquiries and investigations, he and his wife always observed chastity."[31] As for the identity of the author, Florencia stated in a marginal note that "it seems from the *Relación* itself that the author was a contemporary of the time of the apparitions."[32] He then deduced

that the author was a Franciscan, quoting lines from the document such as "the very exemplary and seraphic fathers of our glorious seraphic Francis," "[Motolinía,] a holy religious of our order of Saint Francis," and "[Zumárraga] belonged to the order of Our Holy Father Saint Francis." By a process of elimination, he concluded that the author was Gerónimo de Mendieta.

Florencia's description of this *Relación* contained elements not found in other accounts or as part of the standard tradition. When Juan Diego left Zumárraga's house, he was late for mass at Tlatelolco and humbly accepted the blows with a stick that in Florencia's day were still given to tardy natives. When Zumárraga asked him for a sign, Juan Diego replied with perfect confidence that "he should ask for any sign whatever, that he would go and ask for it in order that he might see that what he was asking was the truth." The *Relación* stated that some people went to Tepeyac at a later date, after the apparitions, in order to find the exact place where the Virgin had appeared so as to pray there. When they approached the spring, which in Florencia's day was called the Pozo de la Virgen, it gushed forth. This was taken as a sign that it was the site of the apparitions. Finally, Florencia believed that this *Relación* was the same one from which Miguel Sánchez and Becerra Tanco got their accounts. Yet from all of Florencia's quotations and references it is abundantly clear that the *Relación* was different, not only from the *Nican mopohua* but also from both Sánchez's and Becerra Tanco's accounts. This *Relación* does not exist today and, most importantly, it is clearly different from any known account of the apparitions. Florencia promised to publish this *Relación* in the *Estrella del norte de México* but did not do so because, he claimed, his book was already too long. Therein lies the problem: it is impossible to identify it with anything known today. Florencia never saw the original nor, as far as is known, did he know Nahuatl. It clearly was not the source used by Sánchez, Laso de la Vega, or Becerra Tanco. Yet, as will be seen, this account has come to be identified by some with the *Nican mopohua*.

There was, however, a second account, which Florencia did identify with the *Nican mopohua*. In words similar to those of Becerra Tanco, he described a Nahuatl account written in the Latin alphabet by an Indian, a graduate of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, that was in a notebook that was in the possession of Alva Ixtlilxochitl. Unlike Becerra Tanco in the *Felicidad de México*, however, Florencia identified it with the one published by Laso de la Vega. It seems probable that Florencia had no first-hand knowledge of this document, that he was simply repeating what Becerra Tanco said, and that he arbitrarily made the identification with the *Nican mopohua* or took it from Becerra Tanco's testimony of 1666.