

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Lady of the Cloak

December 12 is the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. I've never been to Mexico, where the miracle that marks this feast day happened and where the miraculous tilma of St. Juan Diego now hangs.

But I have seen a small square of that mysterious cloth. A tiny, postage-stamp-size piece of the cloak was given to the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. It is kept in a glass case, in a small side chapel of the cathedral named for the woman whose image is preserved on that cloak.

The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels is not a very warm or inviting space for prayer. But it radiates warmth from that side chapel—and not just from the many candles that burn in Our Lady's honor.

The chapel is not much bigger than a broom closet. There are no elegant images lining the walls, no elaborate carvings depicting saints. There are just candles and that scrap of cloth. A flyer explains its significance. Otherwise, you could walk past and not even notice it. I suspect the same could have been said 2,000 years ago about the woman depicted on that cloak.

Picture this: A young woman, a peasant, walking barefoot to the well in Nazareth, or shopping at the market, or quietly working her loom, making a blanket for the baby she will be delivering any day. Or picture this: that peasant girl sweeping her floor, cleaning out her tiny home, opening the door to shake out the dust and squinting at the setting sun, as the days grow shorter and the nights grow cooler. She will be making a journey soon—a long one, to the place of her husband's family. Her back aches. Her neck is stiff. She feels bloated and unlovable and terrified.

In short, she feels like every expectant mother in Nazareth—or anywhere else, for that matter. Perhaps her neighbors notice that she is quieter than most girls, more prayerful, less playful than a lot of teenagers. She seems peaceful, though. Serene.

Otherwise, she is just one of countless pregnant girls living with the drudgery of life in first-century Judea. But think of her this Advent. Think of the journey she took. Think of how this seemingly unremarkable girl did something very remarkable. She changed history. She birthed hope. She helped to save the world.

And when the time is right, she gave another humble peasant a cloak filled with flowers, and burned into that cloth her own image—among the first portraits to depict her as pregnant. Great with child, great with possibility.

It is a beautiful image of Great Expectations—a signal, perhaps from this Lady of the Ancient World to the people of the New World. When she appeared to Juan Diego, America was just beginning. Perhaps its patroness was offering this image as her gift to the hemisphere.

Yours is a land of promise, she was saying. A land of possibility. Here I am—also full of promise, and possibility, giving myself to you.

Surely, it's no accident that this feast of Our Lady comes just before Christmas. Cherish it. It's the first gift of the season, and one that makes the waiting of Advent all the more worthwhile.

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