


Marian Apparitions

ome of the most fascinating and persistent occult phenomena to afflict our planet are the continuing apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary - or BVM to us aficionados - who first began to appear to the faithful (and otherwise) in 352 A.D. and whose appearances continue in modern times.

It is natural for non-Catholics to assume that the Church has a vested interest in certifying Marian apparitions, to impress believers and non-believers alike. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case, and the elaborate bureaucracy and methodology for evaluating miracles conforms rather admirably to scientific method. The great majority of Marian apparitions - well over 95% - are flatly rejected because they don't meet the 'miracle investigators' high standards of proof. The miracles that remain, the intransigent few, are grudgingly dubbed 'worthy of belief'.

One of the approved apparitions, and my personal favorite, is Our Lady of Guadeloupe, who appeared in 1531 to the peasant Juan Diego of Guadeloupe, Mexico. The Lady asked Juan to be her messenger to the local Bishop and, charmingly, provided not one but two miracles of manifestation to aid poor Juan in his task. One of these, a bouquet of flowers produced in winter, is long gone but the other survives to our day and continues to awe the credulous and puzzle skeptics. It is an image of the Lady herself, printed or painted on Juan's *tilma*, an apron-like garment made of agave fiber. Though the *tilma's* fabric is quite coarse, the image on it is photographically crisp, with no visible brush marks. No one has satisfactorily explained how such precise work could have been done in 1531.

But even more astonishing is the *tilma's* very survival. Ordinarily, agave fabric disintegrates in 20 years or so, but for 475 years the Guadeloupe relic has survived exposure to candle smoke, incense, and handling by many thousands of believers. Even the colors of the image remain surprisingly bright and clear which is, simply put, impossible. The frail fabric even survived, unscathed, a 1921 bombing that shattered the surrounding building.



So the image is one of these confounding things, a persistent, incarnate mystery, like the Patterson-Gimlin Bigfoot film or the Voynich Manuscript; they don't seem to really belong to our world and yet, unquestionably, they are in it.

When formulating an opinion about odd objects like the Guadeloupe image, it seems to me that there are two ways to go wrong. One is to reflexively deny the miraculous aspects of the object; the other is to accept it at face value.

Reflexive skepticism is a mistake because it pointlessly shrinks our world. It takes the mystery out of something that is, in fact, mysterious and, over time, diminishes our ability to accept the miraculous aspects of day to day existence.

Simple acceptance goes wrong by pretending to more certainty than is actually possible; after all, the *defining feature* of the Guadeloupe image is its inexplicability - and if we can't explain the object, it is mere hubris to pretend we understand its maker.

We have to find a middle ground between these two responses - to acknowledge the miraculous intrusions into our world, while not blindly accepting the intruders story at face value.