

Gang Signs

Today we celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and you have probably heard all the amazing stories. The temperature of the tilma is a constant 36.6 C which is the same temperature as a human body; the stars on her mantle have been discovered to be the exact same constellation of the winter sky in December 12 1531 but from the perspective of the heavens, someone looking from heaven down onto the stars; finally, it is virtually indestructible because dynamite was placed in a flower vase right under the image which destroyed windows and marble altar rails 150 ft away and the brass crucifix was heavily distorted with the image unharmed.

What is fascinating is that none of these scientific marvels were the reason why in eight years nine million people converted! Mary was able to convert so many hearts was because she spoke their language.

The missionaries who had come to the Aztec people of the time tried a thousand different ways to try to evangelize to the people, but none of their methods worked. What the Spaniards did not understand is that the Aztecs communicated through images, through hieroglyphics. Therefore, the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe was hieroglyphic letter.

Her position in front of the rays of the sun and on top of the moon indicated that she was greater than both their highest God (the sun) and the god of darkness (moon). The angel underneath her feet and the special teal colored mantle and the presence of the stars on her mantle revealed that she was a Queen from Heaven, royalty from above.

Furthermore, her head and hands bowed in prayer indicate that although she is greater than their gods and of high royalty, there is one greater than her: the Christian God indicated by the black cross on the brooch of her neck.

The image of a woman who seemed to be of European and indigenous descent spoke volumes to the indigenous Aztecs. It was reported that when they came to be baptized many of them were brought to tears because of this image. Indeed, this image truly was an evangelization, the sharing of the good news. St John Paul II would call the Guadalupe event, "the model of evangelization perfectly enculturated."

Therefore, the lesson that we can glean from this event is that when we share the news of the Gospel, we need to speak the language of those to whom we are talking, we need to understand their sorrows, their joys and their hearts so that when we share the message of Jesus, it is indeed a message of Good News and not bad news. This does not mean compromising the integral truth of the Gospel but rather presenting it in a new way that will have greater vibrancy and resonance in the hearts of the listeners as Mary did.

Edwin Uzi Mendez was part of a ministry called St. Paul Street evangelization. He used to be the gang lord of the Cobras in Chicago, but eventually had a conversion and wanted to reach out to other people. Unfortunately, he had set up his table in the territory that belonged to a gang named the Latin Kings and some thugs were approaching him to give him some trouble.

“We don’t need you! We’re members of the biggest gang in the whole country!” one of them sneered. Then they flashed their sign to me.

“Oh, yeah? I belong to the biggest gang in the whole *world!*”

This got them thinking. “What gang is that?” they wanted to know.

I flashed the sign of my gang. I made the Sign of the Cross.

“The Catholic Church!” I replied.

They talked about the Lord’s mercy, the protection of our Lady being greater than any gang because people had to pay money for protection from the gang and he was appealing to the part of gang culture that they knew. That evening they went to church and went to confession and this all happened on Divine Mercy Sunday.

What these stories illustrate is that if we speak the language of the people, the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be truly seen as good news whether you are an Aztec or a gang member in Chicago—Jesus can speak to their heart. Therefore, today we ask for the special intercession of our Blessed Mother who is the Star of Evangelization to give us wisdom and insight into how to evangelize our loved ones, our neighbors and our world so desperately in need of the good news.