

On Pilgrimage/Mixican Pilgrimage - February 1958

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: An account of a pilgrimage to Mexico to the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe with a group from Minnesota. Highlights the faith of the Mexican people in spite of a history of church persecution. (DDLW #734).

Today is the feast of Sts Vincent and Anastasius, martyrs. In Saragossa, Spain, in 304, Vincent was placed on a gridiron over burning coals. "God tried them like gold in the furnace." Anastasius, a monk from Persia was beheaded in 628 after suffering terrible torments. While burning on the gridiron, Vincent exclaimed, "I thought your cruelty would go still further." Anastasius also said, "I expected a more cruel kind of death." Both died on the same day of the year, so their feast day is celebrated together. This information is given at the beginning of the Mass, and it is the kind of thing Ammon Hennacy delights in reading, and which he says makes him feel like a "pip-squeak." Being only five or six years a Catholic, the lives of the saints are new to him, who is used only to the lives of the martyrs of the radical labor movement. He is not at all bothered, as I used to be, at the emphasis on suffering, which I uneasily used to think showed a spirit of masochism. Ammon always seems to have known that man's "faith, more precious than gold, must be tried as in the fire." "A servant must not be above his master, and if they have persecuted me they must also persecute you," Our Lord said.

A strange thing is this faith of ours. "You do not enter Paradise tomorrow or the day after, or in ten years," Leon Bloy wrote. "You enter it today when you are poor and crucified."

I have just left a country where the people are poor and crucified. They have, within our lifetime, suffered a religious persecution like that of Russia, or like that of France only so recently as 1905, and which the Church needs must undergo, if her faith is to be proven,—if she is to walk in the footsteps of her Master.

I'd like to quote the whole of the Mass of this day, but lacking space, I can only ask our readers to read in the book of Wisdom (Douay Bible) Wisdom 3, 1- 8, and Luke 21, 9-19.

It all seems so clear, when you go to Communion each day and read the Bible, receiving the word of God made Flesh and the word of God, in this case presented in the missal.

Fr. Leo Neudecker invited me last year to make the pilgrimage with

his group from the Winona, Minnesota diocese, to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, but I was not able to go since I was in jail for five days last January, for our civil disobedience gesture of two years ago. We served our 30 day sentence for 1957 in August, and since if the drill is held again this year and we refuse to take part we are in danger of another sentence,

I was very happy to accept his invitation and join the fifteen members of the pilgrimage at Kansas City and proceed by train to Mexico.

Fr. Neudecker has the true pilgrim spirit, sitting up all night in uncomfortable, unheated dirty trains that stop at each small town all through Mexico, and bringing with him cartons of good whole wheat bread baked by himself. He will not like my reporting this, but he is one of these young priests, and thank God there are many of them, who sleep on boards, do without tea, coffee, tobacco, liquor, radio, television, newspapers and magazines in a life which they do not consider at all mortified. All these things which the world finds sweet, they find bitterness, as Thomas a Kempis puts it. And living this right-side-up life which the world considers upside-down, they get great joy out of it and seem very happy men indeed.

I could write a separate article about the pilgrims, and perhaps I will later, but I can only say here that they were all Minnesotans, of different formerly European backgrounds, Poles, Czecho-Slovakians, Germans, and so on, whose parents came to the middle west and lived pioneers' lives, and progressed from sod houses to the latest in our American culture of comfort. It was hard for them to understand the poverty of the Mexicans. Who to blame it on, Spain, or the Church, or the American imperialist or their own laziness? Wisely, they concluded the matter was not so simple, and just wondered at how differently people react to the challenges of life. One thing they wondered at and marvelled at, and that was the faith of the Mexican pilgrims who come by the hundreds and thousands to the shrine, and to other shrines of Mexico. Where we in the United States enjoy every other kind of outing, the Mexican finds his joy in the pilgrimage. It is a nation of pilgrims. As the Moslems go to Mecca, as the old tradition of Russia was to revere the pilgrim, as the tradition in the East was to spend the latter third of one's life in the search for God, so in Mexico, to make a yearly pilgrimage, on foot, carrying banners, singing hymns, begging one's food from village to village,—this seems to be the accepted vacation, recreation, retreat, mission. Pilgrims go to offer supplication or thanksgiving, to offer homage to God and the saints.

Coming to Mexico my first impressions were that the people put first things first—God and religion, where it has survived the bitter persecution of the Church which began with the Reform laws of 1857, and was intensified under Calles in the 20's and continued in the 30's. Graham Greene wrote about it in 1939.

Sad to say, there are huge areas where there are still no priests and the churches have fallen into decay. The greatest problem of Mexico is the need for priests (who cannot yet be ordained in Mexico) and for catechists. But I will speak from now on of the great mass of religious Mexicans, because those were the ones we saw, on pilgrimage as we were. We saw the churches being rebuilt in town after town, and new churches going up. Even one of our guides said that during those months of the year when there was no work, he offered himself to the priest as a laborer. "We have the earth, the adobe, the materials, and we give our labor, and that is the greatest cost," he said.

The great truth that dawned upon me as I travelled was that here, the people themselves, with no particular leaders that stand out as Gandhi or Vinoba Bhave stand out, standing against militarist leadership have won, by their suffering, by their endurance, the religious freedom they now have in abundance and which is still against the law on the books in Mexico.

I saw the church in Coyoacan where Donald Demarest lives, where a machine gun killed worshippers as they came from Mass, back in the 20's, and young men were laid out dead on the plaza in front of the church to deter other worshippers. I saw the tomb of Fr. Pro, Jesuit martyr, who was a mechanic in a garage where he also conducted a seminary, who was accused of being implicated in the death of Obregon, and was shot into an open grave, with his brother suffering death at his side.

I saw churches made into restaurants and garages. I saw the priests dressed in business suits and collar and tie. But I saw also on every hand, the faith of the people. The people, the ordinary, common people! There is a magnificent tribute paid them by Monsignor Guardini, in his "The Church and the Catholic." The present Pope in one of his Christmas addresses distinguishes between the *masses* and the *people*. The Communist refers to the *masses*, which can be moved and swayed and used in the tactic of class war. But the *people* are another matter.

The people, their work, their poverty, their endurance! They are close to the soil, living in homes made of the soil around them, surrounded by the ever changing mountains, at the time of our pilgrimage as brown as the fields on every side, as the adobe huts, as the burros they rode, as the roads they trod. "You cannot change the people," the guide said. "They are like the hills. They will always be there."

It was in 1531 that Our Lady appeared to the Indian Juan Diego (his Spanish name given him at his baptism.) There were not many Catholics then among the Indians, and the treatment of the Spaniards who had conquered them was not calculated to convert them very fast. If ever the tension which always exists between church and state showed, it did then, between the conquistadores and the padres who came with them to bring the message of the gospel. The conquistadors were hungry for gold and silver which was mined in great

abundance. We still saw the mines operating around Guanajuato, and saw too the Indians sieving the soil for gold and silver in the dry river beds on the way to Guanajuato from San Luis Potosi. Much gold was sent back to Spain and the brothers of St. Teresa of Avila sent her gold too to help build her convents. They too were in search of their fortune. It was under Archbishop Zumarrago that the vision of the Blessed Mother appeared to the poor Indian by the side of the hill of Tepeyac, asking that a shrine, a temple, be built there in her honor. It was as though she were discontented with the way Constantine had brought about the conversion of the pagans of Europe. She was going to bring it about in her own way. She appeared in the guise of an Indian maiden, young and beautiful, surrounded by rays of gold, clad in a white and gold embroidered dress, covered by a blue star-studded robe, standing on a half-moon, borne aloft by an angel, her hands folded together in prayer. She told Juan that she came because she loved the Indian and wished to protect him. She came as an Indian maiden, as Indian as Katherine Tekakwitha of the Iroquois, and she came to them, not to the Spaniards. She came as one of the colored peoples of the world, to a colored people and unlike her history in other shrines, she left them a memento of herself. When the archbishop demanded proof that Juan Diego's story was not just imagination, and he told our Lady, she commanded him to pick some miraculous Castilian roses which bloomed at her word on the barren hill and carry them in his tilma, his cloak, woven of the maguey fiber, and show them to the archbishop. When he did this, and emptied his tilma at the feet of the prelate, the Spaniard fell on his knees before the Indian holding up the tilma, on which had appeared the likeness of our Lady of Guadalupe. This same story is told of Veronica's veil, on which the face of Christ was imprinted, and our Lady used this precedent to give herself to the Indians, not only of Mexico, but of all the Americas, of our own United States as well as Mexico, Central and South America.

And of all the representations of the blessed Mother of Christ, this to me is the most beautiful.

After that occurrence, the Indians were converted by the tens of thousands.

"We have the answer to the problem of color which confronts the East and the West," Archbishop Miranda, primate of Mexico said to us in an interview on the last day. "Our Lady answered it then. There is no problem in Mexico. Where there was the Indian, there is now the Mexican. There is a new people, a new race. There was intermarriage from the first."

Archbishop Miranda certainly understood the power of non-violence. He told us of interviews he had in Europe with repatriated priests and nuns who had been imprisoned with the millions in Siberian labor camps. "And they want to go back," he said. "They feel that there is a fruitful field for conversion. There the people are eager for faith."

The Russians consider themselves not only Europeans but also Asiatics. Perhaps it is from this their Messianic idea comes. The Mexicans many of them look as though they had come over from Asia, over the Aleutian Islands, down through Alaska and along the coast to Mexico.

The Archbishop told us of the increasing number of pilgrimages that were coming to Mexico from every state in the United States as well as Mexico to visit the shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe and to venerate the picture on the tilma which hangs behind the high altar in the Basilica.

I am always conscious when I write, of the many non-Catholics who read the CATHOLIC WORKER and who are averse to such veneration. I can only point out with St. Augustine that the flesh of Jesus is the flesh of Mary, that He took his humanity from her. And call attention to that greeting of Elizabeth, "Blessed art thou amongst women!"

God means us to use material things as aids. He clothed the sacraments with bread and wine, with water, with oil, with the accompaniments of all beauty of ritual, music, color, odor of flowers and beeswax and incense. The Indians too say, "With this body I thee worship," coming on their knees to the shrine, singing hymns to El Senor, in lamentation and petition, in joy and thanksgiving. They come with their centavos and their pesos, and buy candles and flowers for an odor of sweetness and they touch the images, the representations of our Lord in all the phases of His agony and death, and in the shrines of the Holy Family, at the manger, in flight to Egypt, at work, and so on. And they kneel before the picture of our Lady by the hour.

We paid many visits to the shrine and never ceased to marvel the people and their faith and devotion. Sunday, after a morning at the shrine where the church and the square in front of it were literally so crowded with pilgrims that it was hard to move, we went in the afternoon to the pyramids and what a contrast this visit was! There were no pilgrims, few tourists, only some picnickers in this archeological park. There were idols but no altars, and there are not even many settlements near this vast place which was formerly a temple for human sacrifice. Our guides told us about the legends of Quetzalcoatl, the blond blue-eyed man who came from the sea and was considered a god. He foretold a time would come when they would be conquered by a people from the sea. We saw the pyramids of the Sun and of the moon, and the great temple and its carving of serpents and gods. And now the sun god is replaced by the Sun of Justice, and the moon god by Our Lady of Guadalupe, and the god of rain and agriculture by our Saint Isador, patron of farmers, and all our galaxy of saints.

What vast ruins and what great cultures have been destroyed, but the everlasting hills remain and the people close to the earth as they are, continue to live to know God, to love Him and serve Him, their first beginning and their last end.

I was thinking today how our pilgrims all come from Minnesota, a state abounding in Indian names of towns, but where are the Indians now? Fr. Leo pointed out to us the contrast between what we English did to the Indians and what the Spanish did. The Indians are still here, thirty million of them, and the country is theirs and the church is theirs, poor as they are. Our Indians have been robbed and all but exterminated, neither converted nor allowed to live under their own religions. First put on reservations, they are now being evicted and sent into the cities to be assimilated, to find employment and social security or idleness and dissipation. As to our treatment of the Mexicans in the States, the articles Ted Le Berthon has been writing for *The Catholic Worker* clearly show how we must examine our consciences.

Another time I must tell the story of Larry Blum who was one of four pilgrims who came from America, and stayed to make a 21 day pilgrimage with eighty Mexicans to the shrine of St. Juan de los Lagos, and met a young Mexican catechist and married her here.