In 1531 in Mexico, ten years after the Spanish Conquest, the Virgin Mary appeared to St. Juan Diego, a devout Indian convert to Catholicism, as he was walking to Mass one Saturday morning in December. She identified herself as Mary, the virgin mother of the true God, who created all things. Calling him, “Juanito, the most humble of my sons,” she told him to go to the Spanish Bishop in Mexico City to tell him she wanted a shrine built in her honor on the spot where she appeared. Her words were: “I am your merciful mother, the merciful mother of all of you who live united in this land, and of all mankind, of all those who love me, of those who cry to me, of those who seek me, of those who have confidence in me. Here I will hear their weeping, their sorrow and will remedy and alleviate all their multiple sufferings, necessities and misfortunes.”

The place was Tepeyac Hill, where a pagan shrine to the native mother goddess had previously stood. She appeared as a teenaged girl of mixed Spanish and Indian blood. When the bishop heard the message he was skeptical, and asked for a sign from the Lady. The Lady had Juan Diego gather roses from the top of the barren hill in winter, arranged them with her own hands in his tilma, and sent him to the bishop a third time. When Juan Diego opened his tilma in front of the bishop the roses fell out, and upon the tilma was the image of the Lady as she appeared. The shrine was built within two years.

Following are several things the indigenous natives would have noticed about the image of Our Lady:

1. She is dressed as an Aztec queen.
2. Around her waist is a maternity belt; its position indicates she is in the third trimester of pregnancy. (The date of the apparition was Dec. 12; the birth date of Jesus Christ is December 25.)
3. The four-petal flower on her gown, the nahuil ollin, is the most sacred flower in Aztec culture, representing life, divinity, and all that is good and beautiful; therefore, the child in her womb must be divine, yet also human, being born of a woman.
4. Our Lady is blocking the sun, showing that she is more powerful than their sun god, Huitzilopochtli.
5. Her position above a crescent moon shows that she surpasses their moon god, Metztli. (Christians recognize her as the “woman clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet” from the Book of Revelation.)
6. Although royal, she is not divine, because she is praying.
7. The name she chose, “Guadalupe”, seems a corrupted translation of the native name “Coatlaxopeuh”, which means, “Who Crushes the Serpent.,” or of “Quetzalcoatl”, the Feathered Serpent God, another Aztec deity, upon which she is stepping. (Christians recognize her also as the Woman in Genesis 3:15.)
8. The constellations on Our Lady’s mantle match exactly the night sky as it was on Dec. 12, 1531. By superimposing the night sky over the image a miraculous story unfolds, one surely understood by the Aztecs, who were master astronomers. Within six years of the apparition, eight million Indians converted to Catholicism, and the abhorrent practice of human sacrifice ceased.

This icon has been on display in Mexico City for close to 500 years and remains as fresh and as vibrant as ever. The cactus fibers of the tilma are still in tact, although such fibers usually biodegrade within twenty years. In 1791 the tilma sustained damage from a chemical spill, yet it repaired itself within a month. In 1921 a bomb exploded in the church, destroying everything except the tilma. No evidence of paint or brush strokes has ever been detected. At very close range, the cactus fibers appear plain. The image is actually suspended 1/100th of an inch above the fibers, and can only be viewed from a distance. The tilma maintains a constant temperature of 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit, which is that of a human body. A stethoscope placed below the belt on the image picked up a heartbeat like that of a baby in the womb. The pupils of the eyes react to light and have the triple refractive property of human eyes. When the eyes of the icon were photographed in 1929, the miniscule image of a bearded man was discovered reflected in both pupils. In 1951, fourteen more figures were discovered, when the pupils were enlarged 2500Xs. It is believed the figures are of those who were present at the moment the image of Our Lady was first revealed.
Every pope since 1754 has honored Our Lady of Guadalupe. In 1999 Pope John Paul II proclaimed her "Patroness of the Americas" and her Feast Day, December 12, a solemnity. She has also become the Patroness of the Pro-Life Movement.