

Beautiful Devotion to Mary in 2019
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In the predawn hours of October 12 in Guadalajara, Mexico, the city is alive in anticipation of the Romeria (short religious pilgrimage) where a tiny cornhusk statue of the Virgin Mary – the Virgin of Zapopan - will make its annual 10 km pilgrimage from the Cathedral of Guadalajara to the Cathedral of Zapopan. Two million people will be lining the route to honour Mary and give thanks for the many miracles attributed to the Virgin of Zapopan.

The History

The village of Zapopan is a quiet place not far from the city of Guadalajara, in the state of Jalisco, with a remarkable history. In the early 1500's, Franciscan friars had settled there and one in particular, Padre Antonio de Segovia, had a small statue of the Virgin Mary fashioned that accompanied him on his apostolic journeys. While the Mixton War was still in progress, Fray Antonio, with his missionary companion Fray Miguel de Bolognia, went among the warring Indians, the image about his neck, exhorting them to make peace with the Spaniards. It is related that while the Fray was preaching, the Indians saw luminous rays coming from the image of Our Lady, and this, as much as his preaching, caused them to stop fighting. In thirty-six hours, Fray Antonio de Segovia brought to the Viceroy for pardon, more than six thousand Indians, who had laid down their arms. From that time Fray Antonio called the image *La Pacificadora*, She Who Makes Peace. In 1541, Fray Antonio gave the statue to the village of Zapopan.

At the end of the seventeenth century, the city of Guadalajara was confronted with a severe plague so the Bishop ordered the statue of the Virgin to be carried in procession from its temple to the Cathedral of Guadalajara. There is, in the ecclesiastical archives, a sworn testimonial from the medical profession in Guadalajara that, following the procession, the plague ceased at once. In 1721, another plague ensued and the Statue was carried from one barrio to another and again the plague came to an end. In 1734, she was named Patroness against storms and lightening, and in 1821, after Mexico became independent, the Virgin was proclaimed the Patroness of the State of Jalisco. On January 18, 1921, the Virgin of Zapopan was canonically crowned.

Today, the Virgin is the patron saint of Guadalajara and is highly revered by millions. Each year, she stays for two weeks in each of the churches of the State of Jalisco from June through September and on October 12, she is escorted back to her own shrine in the Basilica Cathedral of Zapopan where she remains for most of the year.

The image is made of pieces of cornstalk smoothed and cemented together by glue. It is approximately thirteen inches in height. Her hands, made of wood, are joined before her breast and her face has eyes and lips that were painted on. The original statue is adorned every year with a new cloak which is made of very fine fabric with beautiful jewels imbedded in the skirt.

She will have a mantilla of fine lace and a blue sash (that of a General) indicating her significance of having been in a battle.

The Romeria 2019

Responding to an invitation to join members of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem (EOHSJ) in Mexico, my husband, Sir Michel Comeau, KC*HS, and I left Halifax, NS, Canada to join members of the Order from the US and Mexico for this annual event. We arrived in Guadalajara on October 9 to find the festivities already beginning for the annual Romeria. We were fortunate to stay at a lovely hotel close to the Cathedral of Guadalajara and that afternoon we witnessed the first procession of Our Lady of Zapopan coming into the



Cathedral of Guadalajara with an honour guard of students, both boys and girls, some as young as 5 or 6 years old dressed in white suits for the boys and dresses for the girls complete with gloves and mantillas. They were accompanied by several dozen Franciscans who seemed to be entrusted with looking after Our Lady for the day. As she entered the Cathedral, she was showered with blue and white confetti while a wonderful soprano sang Salve Regina. Evening prayer followed with a particular dedication to Mary; this was clearly a very deeply spiritual occasion for the parishioners in the Cathedral.

The next two days saw the Cathedral doors decorated with garlands of flowers and hundreds of people visiting the Cathedral; the atmosphere was electric.

On the eve of the Romeria, Our Lady was taken in a vehicle similar to the Popemobile, to be present for an outdoor mass in the Plaza de Instituto Cultural Cabanas celebrated by the Cardinal Archbishop. At the completion of mass, a procession of clergy, seminarians and the members of the Order escorted her back to the Cathedral of Guadalajara. The streets rang with the chant "Viva! Viva!", as well as joyous songs and prayers. Some of the faithful wept as the procession went by; others were praying the rosary. As we approached the Cathedral, the bells tolled for the entrance of the



Virgin into the sanctuary in preparation for Benediction; she would remain there for the night. Some of the faithful kept vigil all night while others woke very early in anticipation of the festive

day to come.



At 5:30 AM, the assembly of participants in the Romeria was in place. Approximately three thousand traditional dancers lead the procession with marching bands and the faithful of Guadalajara lined the streets. The float containing the Virgin of Zapopan was accompanied by Bishops, priests,

seminarians and members of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre who were a part of her Honour Guard. Singing and shouts of *Viva la Virgen de Zapopan, viva! Viva la Pacificadora, viva! Viva nuestra Generala, viva! Viva Cristo Rey, viva!* were heard throughout the morning. We witnessed several people walking barefoot as a way to express their devotion to the Virgin. In several places there were groups of men and women in traditional costumes on horseback who had come to witness the Virgin going through the streets. There were people of all ages from babies to elderly people who patiently waited, some for many hours, on this joyful peaceful day. As we approached the Cathedral of Zapopan, we entered through a large stone arch where crowds were waving and singing. One little boy, perhaps 4 years old, dressed in robes like a Franciscan, waved to us from his mother's arms; both were smiling. By 11:30 AM, the Romeria was complete and the tiny statue of the Virgin had arrived at the Cathedral of Zapopan for an outdoor mass. Thousands received the blessed Eucharist after which Our Lady of Zapopan was escorted to her very beautiful shrine in the sanctuary of the Cathedral where she would stay until next year. The members of the Order, once again, were her Honour Guard at she was carried to her shrine. We were blessed to be close enough to see her small face.



Photo: Inside the Cathedral of Zapopan

It is difficult to describe the emotion and profound awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit we felt. I believe that all of us, as members of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, knew we had just been a part of very beautiful sacred event.

Testimonials

The day after the Romeria, the front page story of the newspaper, El Informador had photos and interviews and this is a translation of what was written:

Since 4 AM, Angelica has been waiting for the procession of the Virgin of Zapopan. In the 47 years of her life, she has never missed this except when her son was born. The year she was pregnant, she was worried about having a miscarriage and she promised the Virgin that if her baby lived, she would come to the procession every year. Her son is 24 years old and she says "We made good on our promise, he is a miracle."

Carman and her three sisters waited from 6 AM. "Since we were small, our parents taught us to come and even though we are old, we still come together."

Maria, another faithful, remembered the Romeria as a good opportunity to give thanks to the Virgin. "We take advantage of the opportunity to see her up close. We are happy because she will help."

Aurelia arrived shoeless, "I came this way since I was pregnant 16 years ago. The birth was difficult but my daughter was born healthy." She was not the only one barefoot. Lasenora Calvillo, aged 59, also walked barefoot because they affirmed that the Virgin permitted her daughter to have a child.



Viva Maria, Viva! Deus lo vult.