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Latin America's Indigenous Saint Stirs Anger, Pride

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Agence France-Presse

The Catholic Church's official portrait shows a light-skinned, full-bearded Juan Diego who looks more like a Spaniard than an Indian.

MEXICO CITY—When the Vatican gave approval last year for Juan Diego Cuauhtlahtozin to become the Americas' first indigenous Roman Catholic saint, many of Mexico's 10 million Indians welcomed the honor as holy vindication of their struggle to overcome centuries of racism and gain recognition as first-class citizens.

But when the church unveiled its official portrait of the 16th century Chichimeca Indian, racial pride turned to puzzlement and, for some, to anger.

The portrait shows a light-skinned, full-bearded man who looks more like one of the sword-wielding Spanish conquistadors who subjugated the Aztec empire. It appears on millions of posters, stamps and wallet-sized prints distributed in advance of Pope John Paul II's arrival here today to canonize Juan Diego.

"This is disturbing," said Fausto Guadarrama, a Mazahua Indian, author and devout Catholic.

Please see SAINT, A4

Continued from A1

"First we win a moral victory. Then we get this image with Western features. Are they trying to conquer us again through this image?"

In a country where religious symbols carry enormous power, the mixed signals about Juan Diego illustrate Catholicism's uneasy relations with native Americans and, more broadly, its difficulties in the quest for souls among non-European cultures around the world. In Mexico, the church's mission is complicated by a shortage of priests, the spread of Protestantism and an armed Indian revolt.

Wednesday's scheduled saint-making Mass at the Basilica of Guadalupe here is a landmark in the Catholic missionary effort, and it touches the core of Mexico's identity.

According to legend, Juan Diego was a Catholic convert in 1531, a decade after the Spanish conquest, when the mother of Jesus appeared before him as a dark-skinned Indian. When the local Spanish bishop demanded proof of the apparition, it was on Juan Diego's rough cloak that the heavenly lady, the Virgin of Guadalupe, miraculously imprinted her image.

Despite doubts by many scholars that Juan Diego ever existed, the cult of Guadalupe flourished. In a masterstroke of religious syncretism, Spanish missionaries spread the story of her apparition to convert Mexico's indigenous tribes from their devotion to the Aztec mother-goddess, Tonantzin, to the Virgin Mary.

Today, Mexicans are overwhelmingly Catholic and mestizo, of mixed Indian and Spanish blood, and the Virgin of Guadalupe is their patron. But Catholicism is losing ground to other Christian denominations, especially among Mexico's full-blooded Indian minority. Wednesday's canonization of Juan Diego is a timely chance to shore up the faith.

The church is also struggling to come to terms with an often violent Indian-rights movement led by Zapatista rebels, whose armed uprising in the mid-1990s won support from some priests in defiance of the Catholic hierarchy.

Pope's Imperative

Reaching Mexico's Indians is so important to the 82-year-old John Paul that he ignored Vatican advice to cancel the journey for the sake of his fragile health. His 11-day pilgrimage, which took him Monday from Canada to Guatemala, ends here Thursday when he beatifies two indigenous Catholic martyrs of 1700, placing them a step from sainthood.

Wednesday's and Thursday's papal Masses are a "recognition of Indians as peoples," Mexico's Catholic bishops said in a pastoral letter, adding that the honored figures "can help us recapture the Indian origins and roots of our people."

Millions of Mexicans plan to line the pope's motorcade route and follow the Masses on television. Large delegations are arriving here from Indian communities in Mexico's rural south, including native dancers in feathered headdress who will perform in the basilica.

The ceremonies "will further the evangelization of the Indians, because the Indians want a brother in



Agence France-Press

A salesman in the town of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas shows poster of Juan Diego.

heaven, someone to protect them," said Father Humberto Medina, a mestizo Catholic priest who ministers to indigenous people in Oaxaca state.

But Indian leaders are divided on the utility of elevating Juan Diego and the two martyrs. Critics of the church call the gestures a belated outreach to an indigenous world that Catholic missionaries have never fully penetrated.

Big Catholic Population

Mexico has the largest Catholic population of any country except Brazil. Yet many rural communities still speak Indian languages and mix Catholic rituals with indigenous traditions passed from their ancestors. About 10% of Mexico's 100 million people call themselves Indians.

None of the Mexican church's 132 bishops are Indians. Its priests are spread so thin that indigenous Catholic communities see them as seldom as twice a year. As in Africa, the church's requirement of clerical celibacy makes it hard to recruit priests among Indians, whose culture views celibate adults as incomplete.

Until recent decades, the Catholic hierarchy rarely spoke out against the bias and neglect that condemn many indigenous communities here to high rates of illiteracy and infectious disease and to a gnawing poverty rare in modern Mexico.

Evangelical Protestant missionaries have filled the vacuum, bringing doctors and schools to indigenous villages and distributing Bibles translated into most of Mexico's 62 Indian languages. Their preaching against alcoholism has improved lives and won converts.

"Other religions put more emphasis on vital questions, and they're gaining followers," said Msgr. Hector Gonzalez, Catholic archbishop of Oaxaca.

According to census figures, 7.3% of Mexicans over age 5 are Protestants, up from 4% in 1990.

The Catholic response to this challenge has been inconsistent. Inspired by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, reformers in the church tried to incorporate customs of native peoples into Catholic life in Latin America, Asia and Africa, much as the early Spanish missionaries did here. But John Paul has moved to rein in that effort.

One reformer, Bishop Samuel Ruiz, built the Native Church of San Cristobal de las Casas. Since 1995, his diocese in Chiapas has ordained more than 340 deacons and recruited about 8,000 catechists, nearly all of them Maya Indians, to help priests minister to remote villages.

In February, two years after Ruiz's retirement, the Vatican suspended the ordination of new deacons in the state of Chiapas. Vatican officials viewed the Native Church as a political base for armed Zapatistas and worried that married deacons were taking over the functions of the clergy. Indeed, many married deacons have begun a campaign to become full-fledged priests.

John Paul's elevation of Juan Diego is part of his effort to reassert control over missionary efforts and side with the downtrodden without endorsing armed revolt, Vatican watchers say. It fits with his campaign to diversify the pantheon of Catholic saints to include more non-Europeans.

"The church's intent is a clear option for the 'poor,'" wrote columnist Hector Zagal in the newspaper *Reforma*. "The great saint of Mexico will be an Indian, who in these times of neoliberal economics would be selling gum on the street and would be written off as an idler by the bourgeoisie."

But what prayers can Juan Diego answer?

Despite his Vatican-certified capacity to perform miracles, many wonder whether the new saint can really stop Indians from leaving the church or achieve a stronger version of the watered-down Indian rights bill passed by the Mexican Congress last year.

"It's not for lack of a saint that Indians are converting to Protestantism," said Roberto Blancarte Fimentel, a sociologist at the Colegio de Mexico.

Skepticism Among Some

Guadalupe Espinosa, an Indian rights activist named for the dark-skinned virgin, called the hoopla over Juan Diego a "smokescreen" to obscure the drive by Indian communities for political autonomy.

"It's nonsense to think that no one is going to mistreat us just because we have an indigenous saint," she said.

Such skepticism is fed by dismay over the official portrayal of a pale-faced Juan Diego by what many Indians believe is still a Eurocentric church. Their criticism has put the hierarchy on the defensive. Cardinal Norberto Rivera, archbishop of Mexico City, now says the church would be willing to endorse any other "dignified" portrait of Juan Diego on posters and icons distributed in Mexico.

The larger-than-life official image that will hang in the basilica Wednesday was chosen, church leaders say, because it is a copy of the earliest known portrait of the saint. An anonymous artist painted the portrait in the 18th century based on oral descriptions handed down from Juan Diego's time.

"During the Spanish colony, Indians were often painted to look European, to enhance their status," said Elio Masferrer, an anthropologist and historian. "That was racist thinking. The curious thing is that today's church hasn't corrected it."