

VIRGILIO ELIZONDO

## DAY ONE

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# *Emerging From Darkness*

### *Introducing Our Retreat Theme*

Do you want God to transform the sadness of your life into a new joy? Do you want God to change your nightmares into sweet dreams? Do you want God to bring meaning out of the apparently senseless situations of life? Do you want God to put new energy into your tired life? If so, join us for a fascinating adventure into the graciousness of God's love which comes to us in totally unexpected ways.

Welcome to one of the greatest experiences of personal transformation ever recounted in the Americas. It is truly the beginning of new life. We invite you to make this transforming experience your own. As you walk with Juan Diego, reexperience your own moments of chaos, desperation and darkness as the moments of greatest fecundity. See how God interrupts your own plans and routines to bring about new life. Rejoice as your darkest breakdowns become your greatest breakthroughs. Juan Diego will be our guide.

We usually do not understand why God allows disasters and disappointments in our lives. We would like a heavenly peace here on earth, but we know that is simply not realistic. Job certainly did not understand his

chaotic life. I am sure that Mary struggled to understand the condemnation and execution of Jesus. This sorrow is a thread that binds all human experience. Juan Diego will help us to see how moments of darkness are but the beginning of new life.

I had a sense of this when I first decided to prepare for the priesthood. My father was a holy man, but, like many Latin Americans, he didn't believe in priests. I knew my decision would disappoint him terribly, but I couldn't turn my back on God. I prayed, pondered, put it off for a while and finally gathered the courage to tell him. It was the hardest thing I have ever done. As I expected, our family harmony fell apart. It took several years to reestablish that harmony, but eventually we were able to rejoice together in my new existence as an ordained priest. Throughout that difficult time of darkness, it was Our Lady of Guadalupe who gave me the strength to continue forward on what was often an uncertain path.

I hope you will find our retreat with Juan Diego and Our Lady of Guadalupe as spiritually enriching as we have. All of us who worked on this retreat have known the beautiful, transforming and life-giving power of Our Lady of Guadalupe through the experience of Juan Diego. We are: Jeanette Rodriguez, a theological professor, wife and mother who has heard many testimonies of Guadalupe from ordinary people; Rosendo Urrabazo, a Claretian priest and a pastoral counselor, who has studied the psyche of Mexican American men; Gloria Loya, a religious woman who has worked in the pastoral fields of California all her life; Alex Garcia-Rivera, a convert to Catholicism, author, professor of theology, husband and father; Anita de Luna, former superior general of a religious congregation dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, who has devoted her whole life to working with people at the grassroots level. I am a diocesan priest

with thirty-three years in parish work; much of that time has been dedicated to understanding and promoting devotion to God's greatest gift to the Americas: Our Lady of Guadalupe. We are all pastoral workers involved with people in the everyday struggles of life; but essentially we are like you: ordinary human beings, Christians.

The wealth of this retreat is not only the richness of the subject matter, but also the diversity of the authors who have contributed to it. Each of us has experienced Our Lady of Guadalupe and Juan Diego in a special way, and we look forward to sharing these life-giving experiences with you.

We invite you to find moments in your life's journey similar to those of Juan Diego. Let yourself discover in the unexpected interruptions of your plans and agendas the loving, healing and saving power of God through Our Lady of Guadalupe. A special and precious gift of God, she comes precisely at our greatest moments of need. She comes to us all without exception. That is her message and her gift. From the arrival of the new people in the Americas, she proclaimed herself to be the mother of all the inhabitants of this land, saying to us as to Juan Diego: "You need not be afraid, am I not here!"

### *Opening Prayer*

O Mother of God and our mother, you are the great light from heaven which illuminated the darkness of Juan Diego during the darkest night of his soul, transforming his agony into the joy of new life. Come to me during this retreat so that your maternal presence may be as enlightening of my darkness and as healing of my wounds as it was for Juan Diego.

As I meet you and converse with you through the

person of Juan Diego, let me encounter your tenderness, your kindness, your compassion, your joy and the strength of new life which has been your gift throughout the ages and which will be your gift to me today.

Come, O Virgin of Guadalupe, and make your abode in me. Make of me another temple where you show your love and compassion to all the inhabitants of this land. Amen.

## RETREAT SESSION ONE

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My name is Juan Diego. I was born and raised in the land of the eagles who are the great mediators between heaven and earth. In 1531, I live in the beautiful valley of Mexico City surrounded by its two snow-covered sentinels: Popocatepetl and Ixtahiuatl which reach out from the depths of the earth to the heights of heaven. I work hard tilling the soil and live a simple but peaceful life with my family—grandparents and uncles and aunts—and a few animals and beautiful flowers. I love the sunrise which is always accompanied by the singing of the birds. There seem to be as many kinds of birds as the stars in the sky. When the rain comes, it is quiet and nourishing; the sunshine is always warm and radiant. Clouds of many shapes move against the blue sky to remind us of our own brief journey of life: here one moment, gone the next. Life is like a dream, our ancestors told us, and we have no reason to doubt that at death we will awake. The God of the near and the far away keeps us alive, and there is never a moment when I am not aware of God's presence. How could earth with its valleys and mountains, its lakes and rivers, its flowers and trees, its vegetables and fruits,

its animals and people, be so beautiful if God is not beauty itself?

But I also know that life is not always beautiful. I know that back in 1519, something happened that stripped everything of meaning, beauty and harmony. Suddenly my whole beautiful world fell apart! Has that ever happened to you? I am sure it has. For in reality it happens to all of us. This is life.

In that year, foreign men on horses came rushing into our world. (We had never even seen horses. We did not know what they were.) Their weapons could kill at a distance—they seemed magical. The men destroyed our cities, devastated our way of life, burned our temples and shops. The priests who came with them told us our gods were false.

Darkness and chaos became our daily lot. Tears and lamentations replaced our dances and songs of joy. The sun no longer seemed to give life, and stars appeared only as reminders of a distant past when everything made sense.

All of a sudden everything went sour! There was no one to turn to. Everyone was telling us what to do, but no one was listening to us, no one even tried to understand our pain and misery. Isn't this the greatest suffering in your life also, when there is no one around to share your pain, to accompany you in your suffering and sorrow? The new priests said they wanted to save us, but we really could not understand for what. Nothing made sense anymore!

Our tears flowed like a rushing stream after a downpour, but there was no one to see them or dry them for us; our cry shrilled through the air like a wild animal wounded in the hunt, but there was no one who was willing to listen to us. Silence became our lot, our faces became empty of expression, our bodies seemed to move

around without a soul. I know that you have had times of devastation. That is why I invite you to walk with me because I want to walk with you, I want to accompany you, I want to share your sorrow and pain, that my own sorrow and pain might become a source of healing to you.

The new priests, the ones with the Christian religion, were kind. They wore the clothes of poor men, yet they were honored by the rich and powerful hidalgos who now ruled our land. We learned to trust and respect these holy men, even though they were so different from us. As they spoke about the creation of the universe, how out of the chaos and darkness God had created everything, I was reminded of our own ancient teachings of how in the midst of chaos and darkness the gods had liberated and brought about a new creation. I realize now that, even as we listened in our own darkness and chaos, a new creation was being prepared and was about to come into being.

Our new priests also told us about a great ancient empire—the Roman Empire—that conquered many lands and peoples. It was in one of those tiny, subjected lands that the Son of God was born in the dark and sacred stillness, to bring the peace and love of God to all people. They told us that, though the powerful tortured and cruelly killed him, though he seemed abandoned even by God, he was resurrected, brought to life again. That moment of supreme darkness brought forth the moment of God's greatest glory.

This was a wonderful story and I grew to believe it. Yet there was still something missing. Something in the depths of my heart. I am sure you have heard beautiful words. You like what you hear, you agree, you find it exciting and yet it doesn't seem to touch you. Well, that is how I felt. But I invite you to continue with me, because God is always greater than the best of men and women.

I left home early one morning while it was still dark,

not only in the sky but in the pain and confusion in my soul. I was headed for church to learn more about God. I was thinking about the wisdom of my ancestors who seemed to understand the creative power of darkness and about the teaching of the new priests: While it was still dark, God had created life; while it was still dark, God had become human for us; while it was still dark, the Son of God had burst from the tomb in the fullness of life. Yes, I was confused and in pain and spiritual darkness, but as I walked, I knew something was happening within that darkness. Something was stirring that I could not quite identify. It was a restlessness, an anxiety, a feeling that something—I didn't know what—would happen.

The ways of God are so far beyond us. I see things in terms of the here and now, and often I think what is happening is horrible and senseless. God sees from the heavens the whole continuum of life and sees how even those things that appear to be terrible are but preparatory moments for something new and fascinating. God is good beyond our wildest imaginings.

As I walked through the mesquites and the nopales, I kicked the sand and looked at the stars, smelled the various aromas of the plants around me. I kept asking myself: Why all this darkness and confusion? Is this the end of all our happiness, or is God going to offer us something new? If there is a God, and I believed there was, there must be some good purpose to all of our troubles. This is what I believed, but I felt very differently, very empty.

I am sure that you, my friend, companion and fellow walker, have had similar situations in your life—an unexpected divorce, a terminal illness, a child of yours condemned to prison, the loss of a job, the betrayal of a friend. There are so many times when our whole world falls apart, when darkness invades us.

One of our companions—a man who lives in your time—had such a trial. He had always worked for the same company. He took his job very seriously; it was the most dominant, consistent thing in his life. One morning, he reported to work and was told that his department, and his job, were gone—eliminated from the company’s budget. His work was excellent, they said, but no longer necessary. He was fifty-four and his training very specialized; he had no prospects for another job. His career was finished. But that was just the beginning of the tragedy. He started to feel guilty, as if he had brought this misfortune upon himself, though he knew he didn’t. He felt ashamed and embarrassed. He didn’t want to visit friends or do things he used to do. He lost interest in almost everything; he felt as if his identity had vanished along with his income. His only concern was how he and his family would survive. The corporate buyouts of the modern business world had crashed into his life the way the conquistadores had come crashing into the life of my people many years before. His life, like mine, was suddenly devastated. What can God want in all this?

Sadly, these moments of destruction happen to everyone. No one can avoid them forever. Even those lucky enough to escape personal tragedy must witness it in others; the death of a loved one brings us the experience of emptiness and finality. As we begin to reflect on this retreat, I invite you to not run away from these moments, do not try to avoid them or escape them. Don’t go looking for them—they will come on their own all too quickly. But when they do come, don’t let them destroy you or your life. It is hard to believe when you are suffering, but our moments of supreme pain and darkness are the moments of our greatest potential; they are the moments when the power of God reaches the depths of our being to touch us, heal us and start us on a new path.

It is in the darkest moments of life that we must receive the Spirit, allowing God to recreate us and our world.

### ***For Reflection***

- *In what ways have you experienced the kind of darkness Juan Diego describes? How did it change you?*
- *Juan speaks of the inadequacy of religious teachings that did not “reach the depths of my heart and soul.” Have there been times when you felt this way about the teachings of your own faith? How did God reach you in the depths of your soul?*
- *What proof can you offer from your own life (or that of another) that our times of darkness “are the moments of our greatest potential”? Describe one such experience to someone who may need to hear it. Or, write it in your journal where it will be available when needed.*

### ***Closing Prayer***

O Blessed Juan Diego, as I begin this retreat with you as my guide, I ask that you accompany me not only during these days, but during the entire journey of my life. You were on the way to hear and learn about God and in the process you experienced the Divine Presence through Our Lady of Guadalupe. Help me to equally experience the Divine Presence in my life, transforming my darkness into the brightness of a new day. Walk with me through any and all obstacles so that God will imprint the divine image upon my heart and soul. Amen.