1995

The Iconography of the Sacred Mother of Santa Maria Tonantzintla

Julia Stephens May
Virginia Commonwealth University

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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE SACRED MOTHER OF SANTA MARIA
TONANTZINTLA

by

JULIA STEPHENS MAY

B.S., Radford University, 1986

Submitted to the Faculty of the School of the Arts of
Virginia Commonwealth University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Dr. and Mrs. Joseph W. May and to my grandfather, Charlie Walton May, 1908-1985. Without their love, support, and guidance this would not have been possible.
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GLOSSARY


Barrio. District.

Casa de Laurentana. House of Loreto.

Cedro de Lebanon. Cedar of Lebanon.

Churrigueresque. Decorative style inspired by Jose Benito de Churriguerra popular in Mexico in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Corona. Crown.

Emblema de la Virgin. Emblem of the Virgin.

Espejo Sin Mancha. Mirror without Stain.


Estípite. Inverted pyramidal-shaped column popular in Mexican Baroque architecture, specifically Ultra Baroque or Churrigueresque.

Estuco. Stucco.

Fuente de Huertos. Fountain of the Gardens.

Nahuatl. Language spoken by people of Aztec descent.
Nino Descendente. Descending Child.

Palma de Cades. Palm of Cades.

Piedra clave. Keystone of arch.

Pozo de Aguas Vivas. Well of Living Waters.

Puerta del Cielo. Door of Heaven.

Purisma Concepcion de Maria. Purest Conception of the Virgin Mary.

Solomonic Column. Twisting column popular during the Baroque Period.

Tonantzintla. Nahuatl, 'the place of our little mother.'

Tota Pulchra. Latin, 'total purity'; a metaphoric reference to the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception.

Yeseria. Plasterwork.
Chapter One

The Parish Church of Santa Maria Tonantzintla

The parish church of Santa Maria Tonantzintla, dedicated to the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, is located in the village of Tonantzintla between Cholula and Puebla in the valley of Puebla, east of Mexico City (Figure 1).\(^1\) It was constructed between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in order to facilitate the growing numbers of native people who converted to Christianity. While the richness of the construction history of Santa Maria Tonantzintla and the culture that produced it are without question, it is the formal and decorative schemes that have elicited the most passionate responses from such scholars as Manuel Touissant who described the interior of the church as a "miraculous grotto."\(^2\)

In the years since the conquest, the native cultures of Mexico absorbed Spanish customs, government and religion, but in many ways retained certain traditional beliefs and practices. This process of the absorption of Spanish cultural forms into the matrix of native Mexican

---

\(^1\) For the remainder of the thesis the parish church of Santa Maria Tonantzintla will be referred to as Santa Maria and the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception will be referred to as the Virgin.

culture has been described as "syncretism." William Madsen uses this term to define "the process of acculturation and the resulting coalescence of traditions from different cultures." He applied the idea of syncretism to the arena of religion to explain the differences and similarities of central Mexican spiritualism and Catholicism. With this premise established by Madsen, this thesis will interpret the image of the Virgin at Santa Maria as a polyvalent symbol. It will argue that, iconographically, the Virgin is fused with the equally complex central Mexican earth goddess Tonantzin, who was worshiped at the time of Spanish contact. This fusion is a result of deeper iconographic parallels between the figures, based primarily on their common roles as a Sacred Mother, creating a coalescence that is uniquely Mexican in conception.

This thesis entails a three-part approach to understanding the iconographic program at Santa Maria. First, an historical and stylistic background of Santa Maria Tonantzintla will be presented. Included in this section is a description of the church and its many saints. The second part is a description of the various images of the Virgin and associated Marian Emblemata within the church design. The third part focuses on the European-based iconography of the Virgin and the iconography of the pre-Hispanic earth mother Tonantzintzin. It will illustrate how the image of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception at

---

Santa Maria is the physical manifestation of a sacred discourse between Catholic and ancient Mexican iconography.

The religious transformation of Mexico began in the third decade of the sixteenth century when Franciscan and Jesuit friars, among other orders, were sent to the New World in an attempt to convert an Indian culture that was considered, "as inferior to Spaniards as children to adults, as women to men...as great a difference between them...as monkeys to men.

armed with a battalion of saints and the message of eternal salvation, and traversed the countryside evangelizing and converting the native population. They tried to show the Indians that:

it was the devil they served and what his occupation was, namely to bear away into eternal damnation and its terrible suffering all those who believed in him...5

The area around Cholula and Puebla was no exception to the efforts of the Franciscans. They established the monastery at Cholula in the 1530's and spread the Christian message throughout the region.6 Tonantzintla, formally

6 For more information regarding the history of the Franciscan Order in the Cholula area, see Antonio Rubial Garcia, Santa Maria Tonantzintla: Un Puebla, Un Templo (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1991), 19. Translation by author.
established as a Christian congregation in 1587, is one of six small villages that make up the municipality of San Andrew of Cholula, which in turn belongs to the jurisdiction of Cholula Rivadavia - the Holy City (Figure 2). The village itself is divided into barrios to which a patron saint and chapel was assigned (Figure 3). These include the barrios of Saints Joseph, Michael, Peter and James. Administrative and religious activity is centered around Santa Maria Tonantzintla, "the place where you adore the lady."

Scholars disagree on the original construction dates of Santa Maria. Pedro Rojas Rodriguez asserted that construction began in the late seventeenth century. He refuted the claim of the Spanish art historian Diego Angulo Iniguez that construction began in 1607 as "too early." Joseph Baird provides dates of "after 1690 and before 1730." Alfonso Simon Pelegri, in his 1971 work Santa Maria Tonantzintla also places the origin in the eighteenth century, but concedes that "the date is unknown."

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9 Simon Pelegri, 2.
10 Rojas Rodriguez, 22.
11 Rojas Rodriguez, 16.
13 Simon Pelegri, 2.
Likewise, Rubial Garcia in his most recent study on the construction of Santa Maria agreed that "little is known about the periods or dates of the different work on the church; no documents exist, and work on it has been scarce," but claims that this structure was built over a preexisting temple.\textsuperscript{14} All agree that the present church was built in stages (Figure 4).\textsuperscript{15} The sanctuary, consisting of two sections, the crossing, and the bell tower were the first to be built "with the help and love of the frail Franciscans."\textsuperscript{16} An unknown number of years passed before the arms of the crossing were constructed. In 1897 (the only confirmed date of any construction at Santa Maria) the facade, two side chapels, and choir were added.

\textsuperscript{14} Rubial Garcia, 39.

\textsuperscript{15} Rubial Garcia divides the construction of Santa Maria into four distinct phases. The first occurred during the middle of the seventeenth century, the second, at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, the third, during the middle of the eighteenth century, and the fourth, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Figure 4 indicates that part of the structure was built in the sixteenth century. Rubial Garcia claims that during the first stage "they built a structure on the base of the actual temple." However, he fails to indicate whether or not this "temple" was a sixteenth century structure. See Rubial Garcia 39-42.

\textsuperscript{16} Simon Pelegri, 3.
Chapter Two
Design of Santa Maria Tonantzintla

The development of Mexican Colonial ecclesiastical architecture, as outlined by Joseph Baird, is divided into three phases: 1) monastery churches 1530-1580, 2) great cathedrals 1630-1680, and 3) parish/pilgrimage Churches 1730-1780. The first phase, monastery churches, are characterized by single naves and thick, defensive walls. They also incorporate large, enclosed, open-air atriums used to facilitate the large number of early native converts. There is little exterior or interior stucco relief and decoration is dignified and restrained. During the second phase, the great cathedral churches were heavily influenced by the various European Baroque styles brought to Mexico during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. These cathedrals are large in scale and incorporate profuse stucco relief in gold leaf and polychrome. In the subsequent third phase, Mexican parish and pilgrimage churches, which were constructed to serve

the needs of rural Christian communities, are a combination of the two previous styles. Most are relatively small in size and formed with a single nave, like their monastery antecedents. However, unlike their predecessors, the interiors of many parish churches are elaborately decorated in the various Baroque styles carried over from the period of cathedral construction.

The plan of Santa Maria Tonantzintla is quite simple. Comprised of a single nave, small transepts and crossing, it is consistent with other parish churches in the area. Recognizing antecedents of the early sixteenth century, Joseph Baird likened the plan of Santa Maria to a "transitional form of a Franciscan monastery." 18 With minor adjustments, the present arrangement of Santa Maria certainly recalls fortress monasteries such as those of San Miguel at Huejotzingo (1529) and San Gabriel at Cholula (permanent structure began 1549) (Figures 5 and 6).

The facade of a Mexican parish church is the first indication of its stylistic individuality. The facade of Santa Maria, although it was added in the nineteenth century, is composed of elements of a first, mild Baroque style introduced by Spain during the first part of the

---

18 Baird, 29.
seventeenth century (Figure 1).\textsuperscript{19} It can be described as mild Baroque because of simple, dignified surfaces and slight rhythm. Paired Tuscan pilasters flank the entrance. Above the entrance is a shallow balcony opening into the choir, fronted by a railing. Flanking the balcony are two niches containing the image of a holy man. Above the balcony is a third niche containing an image of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child, to whom the church is dedicated. The upper most edge of the front facade is topped with a balustrade.

Set behind the facade on the north edge of the building is a pink, double-stacked bell tower (Figure 1). It is composed of pairs of solomonic columns, typical of an elaborate Baroque style, on its four sides. Between these the bells within are exposed. At each corner sits an Evangelist with his accompanying attribute taken from Ezekiel (1:5-14) and Revelation (4:6-8). Matthew is shown with the winged man, Mark with the lion, Luke with the winged ox, and John with the eagle. The roof of the upper

\textsuperscript{19} Because the focus of this thesis is iconography and not style, the stylistic terminology of Santa Maria has been simplified. The Baroque styles makes itself apparent in varying degrees, from the mild Baroque of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, to the Ultra Baroque of the mid-eighteenth century. The Neoclassical style is also evident in two altars located in the first bay of the nave. When discussing the interior and several altars in the church, the term "Ultra Baroque" will be used. The term "mild Baroque" will be used when discussing the facade. Additionally, the church was built by the natives of Tonantzintla, under the direction of the Franciscan friars, resulting in a pronounced 'folk' character, specifically in the sculptures of the facade.
section of the belltower is domed and encircled by solomonic pinnacles.

The crown of the dome is capped by a lantern and cross. Extending to the far eastern portion of the structure is the cupola. At each of the cardinal directions of the cupola is a window and on the top, like the belltower, a lantern and cross (Figure 7). The front facade, belltower and dome are layered in bright red, blue and yellow azulejos that have made the Puebla area famous.\(^{20}\) The remainder of the building is painted bright yellow (as of January, 1995).

The vestibule of the church is accented by an intricately carved wooden doorway, topped with a scallop shell motif (Figure 8). To the north and south of the doorway are two small chapels. The north chapel, called the baptistry, contains a baptismal font, processional images of the Virgin Mary, and an altar to Saint Anthony of Padua (Figure 9).\(^{21}\) The south chapel contains various other images of the Virgin and oil paintings depicting the baptism of Christ and the life of Saint John Nepumuc.\(^{22}\)

The simple plan and mild Baroque exterior of Santa

\(^{20}\) Sanford believes that the use of colored tile is a result of the Moorish influence in Spain that was transferred to the New World, "Dominicans brought potters from Toledo (Andalucia) to teach the indians pottery," and this tile production "reached its height in the Churrigueresque." See Sanford, 231.

\(^{21}\) Simon Pelegri, 9.

\(^{22}\) Simon Pelegri, 9. No photograph is available for this chapel. A description is provided by Rubial Garcia, 109.
Maria Tonantzintla are ultimately subordinated to the profuse Ultra Baroque stucco relief of the interior (Figure 10). It is because of the brightly painted and gilded vesria and estuco that Santa Maria Tonantzintla has aptly been described as "the sanctuary of some god."  

Scrollwork, flowers, fruit, putti, heavenly musicians, emblems and saints literally cover every available space. Light floods in from the clerestory and dome windows, reflects off of the gilded stucco and produces an intoxicating effect. An exaggeration of any interior decorative program yet produced in Mexico, the "scrolls are elongated and attenuated until they become delicate plaster darts. Crossings and coilings reached exaggerated extremes, which underlie and emphasize the polychrome work."  

Hidden within this "inverted garden" is a complex iconographic program made up of more than thirty Catholic saints "who sing the litany of the Virgin," angels, and Marian attributes articulated in stucco relief. Sixteen saints are incorporated into the stucco decoration of the interior. The remainder are either freestanding or included on altars (Diagram 1).

Two altars in golden Ultra Baroque splendor, located in the third bay of the nave, are dedicated to Saint

---

23 Touissant, 205.
24 Castedo, 116.
25 Rojas Rodriguez, 13 and 35. The identification of most saints at Tonantzintla is provided by Rojas Rodriguez and Rubial Garcia, unless otherwise noted.
Anthony of Padua and Saint John Nepomuc, respectively (Figures 11 and 12). Both are wooden, layered in gold leaf, and described as "the most beautiful and in the pure Churrigueresque style."²⁶ Each is complemented with the estipite that was popular in the eighteenth century. Many saints are incorporated into these altars as are numerous angels and the heads of the Twelve Apostles.

Two additional Ultra Baroque altars are situated in the transepts. The first in the north transept is dedicated to the Wounds of Christ (Figure 13). The second, an altar dedicated to the Passion of Christ, is located in the south transept (Figure 14). These altars are in the refulgent Ultra Baroque style and were described by Rojas Rodriguez as being, "of small proportions, adequate to the size of the temple with very good craftsmanship."²⁷

Indicative of the stylistic diversity of Santa Maria Tonantzintla are two Neoclassical altars in the second bay of the nave, which Pelegri believes are "out of place with the features of the church."²⁸ Both were constructed during the nineteenth century.²⁹ The first, along the north wall of the first bay, contains a life-size image of Saint Sebastian (Figure 15). Below Saint Sebastian,

²⁶ Simon Pelegri, 8. The Ultra Baroque is also referred to as Churrigueresque, a style originated in Spain by the Salamancan architect Jose Benito de Churriguerra (1665-1725) and brought to its zenith in Mexico by his follower Lorenzo Rodriguez. See Baird, 16-20.
²⁷ Rojas Rodriguez, 25.
²⁸ Simon Pelegri, 9.
²⁹ Rubial Garcia, 42.
standing on a table is an image of Saint Joseph. This area is described as "where the cult of Saint Joseph, the Virgin and Saint Sebastian take place." 30 The second Neoclassical altar along the south wall is identical to the altar of Saint Sebastian, and contains an image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, surrounded in white neon tubing. 31

The crossing of the church is capped with a dome covered entirely in polychromed stucco relief. At the center of the dome is the dove of the Holy Spirit (Figure 16). The Four Evangelists sit in the pendentives of the dome (Figures 17, 18, 19 and 20). 32 Directly above the Evangelists, standing above angels with flaming red wings, are the Four Fathers of the Latin Church; Saints Ambrose, Gregory, Augustin and Jerome (Figures 21, 22, 23 and 24). Saints Anthony of Padua and James of Acala look down from above as they sit above the north and south transept arches (Figures 25 and 26).

30 Simon Pelegri, 8.

31 I would like to thank the sacristan of Santa Maria Tonantzintla and his family in their assistance of the identification of this image of Christ. (January 9, 1995). There is no photograph available for this altar. Observations made are based on field research.

32 It should be noted that the interior images of the Four Evangelists are without any distinguishing attributes and identification of them are conjectural. See Royas Rodriguez, 37 and Rubial Garcia, 57.
Chapter Three

Iconography of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception

Considered by Catholics to be purity personified and the only woman worthy to bear the Savior, the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception is the focal point of the artistic program of Santa Maria. As such, this program is comprised of four statues of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception and several stucco reliefs that represent her “immaculate” attributes, referred to here as “Marian Emblemata.”

This chapter will first discuss in detail each statue of the Virgin, beginning with the facade and continuing to the main altar. Secondly, it will discuss the Marian Emblemata, with specific attention to their biblical references. It will also discuss other stucco reliefs which identify the Virgin. Attention will be paid to the images of the Virgin on the main altar, the Descending Child, and the Dove of the Holy Spirit which eternally reenact the Annunciation by their placement along the east-west axis of the crossing. Also to be addressed are the images of God the Father, the Resurrected Christ, and the Dove of the Holy Spirit, which are aligned along the north-south axis of the crossing and transepts, to create a strategic and powerful arrangement of the Holy Trinity.
 Appropriately, the first image of the Virgin greets the visitor on the facade of Santa Maria (Figure 27). This image was most likely added in 1897, when the facade was constructed. In the uppermost niche, a rotund Virgin cradles the Christ Child while holding a lily, the symbol of her purity. Christ extends one hand in blessing and in the other one he holds a globe, interpreted by Rojas Rodriguez as “the weight of the world.”\textsuperscript{33} This image of the Virgin and Child, designated by Rojas Rodriguez as a “Purisima,” crowns a symbolic triangle of niches above the entrance.\textsuperscript{34} In niches to the lower left and right of the Virgin and Child are Saints Peter and Paul (Figure 1).\textsuperscript{35} Both saints are stylistically similar in stance, gesture, and dress. Both hold the Bible and their arms are extended in a gesture of welcome and blessing.

The second image of the Virgin is located on the wooden vestibule door inside the main entrance.\textsuperscript{36} This small image of the Virgin is carved in wood. Dressed in a long mantel, the Virgin stands atop a crescent moon inside a scallop shell which is commonly associated with Saint

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Rojas Rodriguez, 28.
\item Rojas Rodriguez, 28. The word ‘purisima’ can be translated from the Spanish as either ‘the Virgin’ or ‘purest.’
\item Identification of the saints Peter and Paul was provided by Pedro Rojas Rodriguez 28. However, when the author asked the sacristan of Santa Maria Tonantzintla about their identity, he simply called them “santos.” (January 9, 1995).
\item There are no previous descriptions or date for the construction of the vestibule door, nor have any authors discussed its significance.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
James the Greater as the patron saint of Christian pilgrims. At Santa Maria the scallop shell emphasizes the importance of the pilgrimage nature of the site (Figure 8).

The third image of the Virgin is located in the ceiling of the choirloft (Figure 28). In this image she stands on a crescent moon above a swirling cloud and is surrounded by fourteen stars. She cradles the Christ Child in her right arm and extends her left arm outward. The Virgin wears a flowing red and yellow brocaded gown accented with gold leaf. Rubial Garcia describes this image of the Virgin as the “Apocalyptic Woman.” A circle of angels surrounds this medallion and beneath it heavenly musicians play French and English horns, cellos, and violins.

The primary image of the Virgin, located on the main altar sits in a glass vitrine outlined in violet neon tubing (Figure 29). The vitrine is encapsulated by an Ultra Baroque baldacchino with numerous angels and flowers

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37 Due to the lack of information regarding this door by previous authors, there is no date for this image of the Virgin.

38 The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception is most commonly depicted with twelve stars, a number with Christian significance, and not fourteen. See Marina Warner, All Alone of Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1976), 248 and the Book of Revelation (12:1).

39 Rubial Garcia, 70. The significance of the Virgin Mary as the Apocalyptic Woman will be discussed at length in Chapter Four.
climbing its twisting solomonic columns. At the foot of the altar is the Crucified Christ. This image of the Virgin, which Rubial Garcia claims to have been placed in the church in the sixteenth century, is dressed in a very pale blue satin dress, accented with gold braid. Over her head and body is a removable, white lace mantel. Again, alluding to the identification by Rubial Garcia as the Apocalyptic Woman, she stands on a silver crescent moon held aloft by an angel. Her hands are held away from her body and she gazes humbly toward the ground. She wears a golden crown and a resplendent silver halo accented by

40 This Ultra Baroque altar is a twentieth century replacement of an eighteenth century “neo-Gothic” altar. See Rubial Garcia, 42.

41 Rubial Garcia states that this statue of the Virgin was placed in the church by the Franciscans in the sixteenth century. However, he cites no primary source for this information and fails to acknowledge the date of the manufacture of this statue. See Rubial Garcia 115.

42 Rubial Garcia does not provide a stylistic analysis of this image of the Virgin, nor does he elaborate on her clothing. The primary image of the Virgin at Santa Maria has much in common with La Purisima Concepcion, by Francisco Morales of 1576 (Figure 31). The most notable similarity is in the shape of their faces, which are long with square chins. As well, both have long slender noses and rosy cheeks. These images contrast with later Mexican images of the Virgin, namely those by Alonzo Vasquez (1605) and Basilio Salazar (1637) in which the shape of the face changes to a rounder, fuller shape with pointed chin. (Figures 32 and 33). First, it is unclear whether or not the clothing of the Virgin is original to the sixteenth century. He does not mention whether or not the clothing has been replaced due to age and deterioration, but photographs of this image taken in 1991 and 1993 show that indeed the mantel has undergone a change, while the blue dress has remained the same (Figures 29 and 29A). It must be noted that popular tradition suggests that the clothing of many Virgins is changed to coordinate to the Christian calendar.
stars. Behind the vitrine is a stained-glass window in yellow, red and blue that provides a sun-like glow. Atop the vitrine the Archangel Michael stands guard with his sword and his army of angels (Revelation 12:7).

Incorporated into the stucco relief of the church are seven Marian Emblemata, two of which are represented twice, namely the Fountain of the Garden and the Well of Living Waters.\textsuperscript{43} These emblemata are representations of biblical verses that express the Virgin's immaculate nature and her role in the Annunciation. Most of these attributes find their sources in the Song of Solomon, about which Marina Warner states:

Because first Yahweh and then Christ appear as bridegrooms, and because the Virgin was identified with the Church the bride of Christ, the rabbinical fathers read the passionate poetry of the Song of Songs as an allegory of God's love, and for later Christian exegetes to identify the lover of the Song with Christ and his beloved with the Church, each soul and the Virgin Mary.\textsuperscript{44}

Variously located in the arches of the nave, the crossing, and on the walls of the choir loft, these emblemata visually reinforce the purity of the Virgin and are constant reminders of her role in the salvation of

\textsuperscript{43} As both representations of the The Well of Living Waters and the Fountain of the Garden are identical, they will be illustrated once.

\textsuperscript{44} Warner, 125.
This use of Marian attributes in conjunction with an image of the Virgin (possessing at the same time apocalyptic iconography such as the moon, sun, and stars) was transferred to Spain from France in the early sixteenth century and has been termed a **tota pulchra** (Figure 30). According to Suzanne Stratton, this conflation of imagery was done in an attempt to distinguish the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception from the Virgin of the Assumption. The **tota pulchra** was then transferred to Mexico by Spanish painters during the early years of the conversion. Examples of painted **tota pulchra** images in Mexico include those by Francisco Morales, *La Purisima Concepción* (1576), Alonzo Vasquez, *La Virgen de la Inmaculada Concepción* (1605-1607) and Basilio de Salazar, *Exaltación franciscana a la Inmaculada Concepción* (1637) (Figures 31, 32 and 33).

The first emblem is located on the north wall of the choirloft and is identified as the Fountain of the Garden (Figure 34). It is represented by a small white fountain.

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47 Stratton, 39-46.
trimmed in gold. It is a symbol of spiritual life as well as salvation, and is a common attribute of Mary as the Immaculate Conception. In the Song of Solomon (4:15), the lover, identified as the Virgin, is described as "a garden fountain."

The second emblem associated with the Virgin is located on the south wall of the choirloft. Called the Well of Living Waters, this emblem is represented as a well over which a bucket is suspended on a hook (Figure 35). This well symbolizes of the Virgin's life giving sanctity, again, as extolled in the Song of Solomon (4:15), i.e. "a well of living water..."

The third emblem, the House of Loreto, is located to the right of the Fountain of the Garden (Figure 36). It is a small brick shelter with a tree growing beside it. It symbolizes the shrine of the Santa Casa, or the Holy House of the Blessed Virgin, from the town of Loreto, Italy, in which is a shrine to the house in Nazareth where the Virgin received the Archangel Gabriel. According to legend, in 1295 angels transported the house of the Virgin from Nazareth to Loreto after three previous attempts to relocate it in other areas of Italy.48 Properly venerated in Loreto, it has been the site of pilgrimages and is said to be place of miraculous cures.

The fourth emblem, located along the arch of the north transept, is the Palm of Cades (Figure 37). Depicted

48 New Catholic Encyclopedia, 993.
as a cluster of palm fronds, the Palm of Cades represents the forty year migration of the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land. While traveling, the Jews led by Moses came upon a place called Qadesh, or in Latin, Cades, meaning 'holy' or 'sacred,' where a "miraculous flow of water" occurred to nourish the weary travelers. Around this spring grew palm trees. The Virgin is, symbolically, the choicest among all palms at this sacred spring.

To the right of the Palm of Cades is the fifth emblem, another representation of the Fountain of the Garden. To the right of this second Fountain of the Garden is the sixth emblem, the Cedar of Lebanon (Figure 38). The Cedar of Lebanon also has as its source the Song of Solomon (5:15). The Virgin, the beloved, identifies her lover, Christ, as having the "appearance of Lebanon, choice as the cedars."

A second rendition of the Well of Living Waters is the seventh emblem located in the arch of the south transept. Next to this is the eighth emblem, the Door of Heaven (Figure 39). Sitting on the back of a winged angel, the Door of Heaven is represented by a tiny castle complete with bell tower, windows, and crenelated walls. Because of her role as the mother of the Redeemer, this door to heaven can be interpreted as the Virgin herself. At the Annunciation, she was told that she would give birth to the Savior, thus opening the door for the redemption of souls.

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49 *Catholic Encyclopedia* (Old Style) Volume 3, 130.
of man. Only through her son, Jesus Christ, can the gates to Heaven be opened, recalling Revelations 4:1 "and low in Heaven an open door!"

Next to the Door of Heaven is the ninth emblem, the Mirror without Stain (Figure 40). The Virgin, because of her lack of sin and as the Mother of Christ, has been identified as "the unspotted mirror of the power of God and the image of His goodness."\(^{50}\) Held by an angel, it is a small silver mirror in a white frame.

There are other symbols incorporated into the stucco decoration that further extol the regal and sacred nature of the Virgin. The first emblem is that of the Holy Spirit and is la piedra clave of the arch between the first and second sections of the nave. It is represented by a tiny image of the Holy Dove (Figure 41).

The keystone of the second arch in the nave that connecting the second and third bays is an Emblem of the Virgin (Figure 41). Two chubby angels hold aloft a round escutcheon in which the letters "A M" are shown, an abbreviation of Ave Maria, or Hail Mary. When he announced the moment of her impregnation with the Son of Man, the Archangel Gabriel said to Mary, "Ave (Maria), gratia plena Dominus tecum, "Greetings most favored one, the lord is with you." (Luke 1:28).

The Crown is situated as the keystone to the third arch between the third bay and the crossing (Figure 42).

It is an ornate gold crown with a red lining, suspended by two angels on either side of the arch. This represents the crown with which Jesus Christ crowns Mary as the Queen of Heaven. It symbolizes not only the Virgin's regal status, "but also the power of the Church for which the Virgin often stands."51

Located on the opposite side of this arch is an image of the Descending Child (Figure 44). In the rendition at Santa Maria, this infant is Christ. In conjunction with the Virgin and the Dove of the Holy Spirit, this arrangement continually reinforces the Annunciation. Throughout the history of art, in scenes of the Annunciation, as the Virgin is impregnated with the Redeemer, a ray of light descends upon her. In this ray of light sometimes is seen a tiny image of the Christ Child descending towards her. This is best illustrated in the Merode Altarpiece by Robert Campin of 1425-1428 (Figure 45). This parallel is even more striking, because the image of the Christ Child at Santa Maria Tonantzintla directly faces the altar and the main image of the Virgin. Similar to Campin's work, the Christ Child descends towards his mother. Symbolically linking the Descending Child with his mother is an image of the dove of the Holy Spirit located in the center of the dome (see Figure 17). This arrangement of the Descending Child, the Virgin directly in front of him, and the Holy Spirit above, has a strong

51 Warner, 103.
temporal significance. It represents the exact moment of the Annunciation. Rojas Rodriguez addresses the arrangement with these words:

...falling towards the keystone of the arch that joins the dome to the nave, descends an infant, his bare feet pointing upwards and on the opposite end his face framed by dark, curly hair. This placement brings to mind the possible relationship of meaning between Maria, the Holy Spirit (at the center of the dome) and the Child that descends.\(^{52}\)

In another arrangement of Christian significance, the Holy Trinity is aligned on the north-south axis by the placement of God the Father in the ceiling of the north transept and the Resurrected Christ in the ceiling of the south transept (Figures 46 and 47). The Dove of the Holy Spirit completes the arrangement, with the Virgin on the main altar acting as “the wife, daughter and mother of the people of the Trinity.”\(^{53}\)

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\(^{52}\) Rojas Rodriguez, 35.

\(^{53}\) Rubial Garcia also discusses this arrangement of the Holy Trinity. See Rubial Garcia, 54.
Chapter Four

The Sacred Mother of Santa Maria

Historians have suggested that before the arrival of the Spanish, the central Mexican earth mother, Tonantzin, was worshiped at or near the site of Santa Maria. Rojas Rodriguez claims that, "In pre-Hispanic Tonantzintla, Tonantzin may have been venerated." And more recently, Rubial Garcia further speculates:

Between the fertile land of the plains of corn, at 200 meters above sea level, there are two small hills that colonial documents designate as Poxtecatl, the larger and Xoxcatecatl, the smaller. On one of these, it is possible, that at the time of the arrival of the Spanish, there existed an adoration sight dedicated to the goddess Tonantzin, and during the festivals of this guardian deity, many devotees visited it. 55

However, in 1587, the Franciscans established a Catholic community at the site, and sometime later intended to replace the goddess Tonantzin with the Catholic Virgin of the Immaculate Conception (Figure 29). Although Santa Maria is dedicated to the purity of a seemingly Catholic Virgin and its decorative program reflects Christian dogma,

54 Rojas Rodriguez, 19.
55 Rubial Garcia, 17. Neither Rojas Rodriguez nor Rubial Garcia provide site sources for any Colonial documents regarding the worship of Tonantzin.
56 Rubial Garcia, 23 and 115.
several elements of earlier central Mexican culture remain.

Ironically, it is within the image of the "Catholic" Virgin that the remnants of central Mexican spiritualism are most evident. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the image of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception at Santa Maria as a synthetic figure, or more specifically, a Sacred Mother, whose iconography is a fusion of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception and Tonantzin.

Many scholars have interpreted iconographic synthesis between central Mexican deities and Catholic saints from the standpoint of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Figure 48).\textsuperscript{57} The Virgin of Guadalupe, designated as the patron saint of Mexico appeared to a newly Christian Aztec, Juan Diego at the hill of Tepeyac, near modern day Mexico City on December 8, 1531. After three attempts to have him intercede with the Archbishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumarraga to build a shrine in her honor, a miraculous image of the Virgin appeared on Juan Diego's cactus cloth cloak. Thus convinced of Juan Diego's sighting of the Virgin, the

Archbishop built a basilica to house the icon.\textsuperscript{58} Most agree that Guadalupe, because of her native qualities (i.e. dark hair, eyes, and skin) and her message to Juan Diego at Tepeyac, to whom she said she was "the mother of all thy people," is the first manifestation of such a synthesis.\textsuperscript{59} It is true that the Virgin of Guadalupe and Tonantzin have many parallels; the most significant of which is the hill at Tepeyac in present-day Mexico City, where Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego. In pre-Hispanic times, Tepeyac served as a pilgrimage site dedicated to Tonantzin.\textsuperscript{60} It is also true that the Virgin of Guadalupe shares many iconographic details with the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. However, few scholars have attempted to draw direct parallels between Tonantzin and a more traditional image of the Immaculate Conception. This thesis proposes that it is the generalized Immaculate Conception and not the Virgin of Guadalupe that holds particular iconographic significance for the people of Tonantzintla. This is not to say that the Virgin of Guadalupe is not revered by the


\textsuperscript{59} Luis Bererra Tanco, \textit{The Felicity of Mexico in the Wonderful Apparition of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Guadalupe}, 1675 (Seville: Tomas Lopez de Haro) as cited in Demerest and Taylor, 8.

\textsuperscript{60} Francisco Javier Clavijero, \textit{Historia antigua de Mexico}, Volume II, (Mexico: n.p., 1958), 82, as cited in Lafaye, 211.
people of Tonantzintla. An Image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is situated on the wall of the north transept and an altar dedicated to her appearance at Tepeyac is located in the sacristy (Figure 49).\textsuperscript{61} This thesis argues, however, that the Virgin of Guadalupe is only an auxiliary participant in the iconographic program at Santa Maria.

Rojas Rodriguez, in his 1957 work Tonantzintla, briefly addressed symbolic parallels between the goddess Tonantzin and the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. His analysis rests primarily on the notions of maternity. Developing his argument on the basis of their names and on a zoomorphic sculpture of the goddess Coatlicue, he concludes that "She is the Virgin of the Conception, the mother of God, mother of man, and grandmother of all men created by God, and this is why she is Tonantzin."\textsuperscript{62} Instrumental to this thesis is the failure of Rojas Rodriguez to consider many other iconographic details of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception and Tonantzin that led to this synthesis. In addition, he fails to consider more appropriate images of the central Mexican mother goddess provided in the chronicles of Friars Bernardino de

\textsuperscript{61} The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the north transept is based on field observation. (January 9, 1995).

\textsuperscript{62} Rojas Rodriguez, 22.
Sahagun and Diego Duran.\(^6\) This chapter offers an iconographic reevaluation of the image of the Virgin at Santa Maria, as previously interpreted by Rojas Rodriguez, based upon more specific primary evidence.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the central Mexican pantheon, with special emphasis on its various mother goddesses, in particular Tonantzin. Focusing on the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, the chapter then discusses the importance of her iconography and imagery to the religious conversion of the natives. It addresses several striking points of convergence between the two and argues that the Virgin at Santa Maria is the embodiment of William Madsen's aforementioned premise of religious syncretism, "the process of acculturation and the resulting coalescence of traditions from different cultures.\(^6\)

Finally, the chapter concludes with an analysis of the iconography and symbolic significance of these mother

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figures, as they symbolize the more fundamental concept of what I have deemed the Sacred Mother.

**Tonantzin**

Before the institution of Christianity, the central Mexican universe was not controlled by one omnipotent father figure, but by many gods who permeated every facet of life. The natives turned to specific gods to entice the rain to fall, to make crops grow, or to herald a new century. Adela Fernandez described the central Mexican pantheon as a "complex symbolization of hundreds of deities which explained the various phenomena that occurred in the lives of the people who worshiped them."\(^{65}\)

Most goddesses in the pantheon were closely associated with the earth and were the expression of maternity and fertility.\(^{66}\) In his exhaustive study of the central Mexican pantheon, Henry Nicholson classified different manifestations of the earth mother into a sub-group he designated as the Teteoinnan Complex.\(^{67}\) The natures of the goddesses that comprise this category are complex and compelling, as most were looked upon as both creators and

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\(^{67}\) Nicholson, 420.
destroyers and were conceived of in "dual, quadruple and/or quintuple form."68

Tonantzin, considered one of the principle goddesses in the pantheon, is commonly referred to as "our mother."69 In other manifestations, she is identified as Teteoinnan (Gods-Their-Mother), Toci (Our Grandmother) and Tlazolteotl (Filth Deity), among others.70 In the form of the dualistic Creator Couple, Ometecuhtli (Lord of Duality) and Omecihuatl (Lady of Duality), Tonantzin gave birth to the gods and fed humans with her milk.71 At the same time she devoured her own children.72 Emphasizing the agricultural and maternal role of this goddess, Rubial Garcia noted that the natives revered Tonantzin and "hoped for fertility in their farms and their women and they offered her the first fruits of their harvests."73 However, while the importance of Tonantzin to the continuation of the agricultural and reproductive cycle is clearly defined, many aspects of Tonantzin remain a mystery. First, she is only generally defined as a mother figure. Second, details of her iconography are scarce. Therefore, in order to reinterpret Rojas Rodriguez and define the Sacred Mother of Santa

68 Nicholson, 409.
69 Sahagun, History, 27.
70 Nicholson, Table Three.
71 Fernandez, 50. These deities are commonly grouped together and called Ometeotl. See Nicholson, 410.
72 Madsen, Religious Syncretism, 381 and 411.
73 Rubial Garcia 17.
Maria, it is necessary to concentrate on three manifestations of Tonantzin: Ometeotl, Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue, whose iconographies most obviously manifest themselves in the image of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception on the main altar at Santa Maria.

Nicholson describes the creative principle of the central Mexican universe, Ometeotl, as a "sexually dualistic, primordial generative power..."74. Although not honored by individual festivals, the nature of Ometeotl was present in all machinations of life and all rituals. As Nicholson notes, the female half of the couple, Omecihuatl, was absorbed into the mother deities, including Tonantzin.75

According to Bernardino de Sahagun, who chronicled the early years of the Spanish conquest and who was instrumental in the conversion of the Indians, Tonantzin was synonymous with the goddess Cihuacoatl, whom he recorded as "the woman of the snake."76 This fierce deity "granted adverse things such as poverty, mental depression


75 Nicholson, 411.

and sorrows." He notes that, "they also call her Tonantzin, which means 'our mother'...."  

In another example, Tonantzin is identified with the goddess Coatlicue, "the one with the skirt of serpents." Coatlicue’s identity is outlined by Adela Fernandez:

...Coatlicue was a descendant of the original Divine Couple whilst at the same time being their mother, since she was the 'mother of the gods' or the 'grandmother goddess.'

Similar to the other mother goddess manifestations, Coatlicue is commonly associated with fertility and maternity. Sahagun describes Coatlicue as the goddess who gave birth to the god of the sun, Huitzilopochtli who in turn caused the demise of his sister, the goddess Coyolxauhqui, who subsequently became the moon goddess. Thus, according to Aztec mythology, Tonantzin symbolizes a virgin mother who divinely conceived

The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception

Hoping to establish a "New Jerusalem" in the New World, Franciscan friars "assumed the character of the Messiahs who journeyed thousands of miles to deliver the

77 Sahagun, History, 26.
78 Sahagun, History, 26-27.
79 Fernandez, 109.
80 Fernandez, 11.
81 For the myth of Coatlicue and Huitzilopochtli see Sahagun, History, 173-177.
Indians from the bondage of idolatry."  

The Franciscans came to Mexico with a sense of urgency, for they felt that the Second Coming of Christ was near.  

In their zeal, they instituted many methods to expedite religious conversion. These methods included the destruction of ancient Aztec temples and idols and the abolition of human sacrifice. Once temples were destroyed, the friars began to replace them with Catholic shrines.  

Accordingly, the Franciscans chose a Catholic patron saint for each village and applied their name to the name of the primary deity worshiped in the village.  

In 1587, on the slopes of the hill Poxtecatl, at the site where Tonantzin was venerated, a Catholic congregation was established and given the name Santa Maria Tonantzintla.  

Santa Maria is Spanish for 'Holy Mary' and the word tonantzintla is the Nahuatl phrase for 'the place of our little mother.' The juxtaposition of these names is a first indication of

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83 For more information on the millennial thinking of the Franciscans, see Phelan.  
85 Peterson, 39.  
86 For further information regarding the Spanish antecedent for the practice of patron saint designation see Nutini, 306.  
87 Rubial Garcia, 23.
synthesis. As Enrique Florescano elaborated:

the new relationship with the present was
made concrete in the Christian name that
was placed before the indigenous name (San
Juan Teotihuacan, Santiago Tlatelolco, San
Juan Coscomatepec), a baptism that abruptly
changed the traditions and identities
of these towns.

The next step in conversion involved indoctrination
into the Catholic faith through the establishment of church
schools for native children, who were taught Christian
stories and Catholic dogma. According to Geronimo
Mendieta:

After teaching the children how to say the
Pater Noster, Ave Maria and Salve Regina
the priests taught them that: there was only
one God and not many like those their
parents adored; that these gods were bad
and were enemies who deceived men; that
there was a heaven above which is a
place of glory....and that there was a hell,
place of fire and infinite punishment and
incredible torture...all those who continued
to adore and obey there gods would go to hell.

An instrumental force in religious conversion was the
Virgin Mary. Like her central Mexican counterpart
Tonantzin, she has several identifications, including the

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88 Rojas Rodriguez, 19.
89 Florescano, 66.
90 For more detailed information concerning the
teachings of the early Franciscans see William Madsen,
Christo-Paganism.
91 Geronimo Mendieta, Historia eclesiastica
indiana, Volume 2 (Mexico: n.p., 1945), 61, as cited in
Madsen, Christo-Paganism, 127.
Immaculate Conception, the Virgin of the Assumption, the Mater Dolorosa or the Mother of Christ. In any of these manifestations she is the focal point of Catholic devotion and art. Her image and nature as a gentle mother figure were used by the Spanish to ease the task of religious conversion. According to John Taylor, the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception was used in the evangelization of Indians "as a symbol of charity and redemption."92 Hundreds of local cults to Mary Immaculate grew up in the hospital chapels founded by the Franciscans in Indian villages dedicated to her and accompanied by an image.

The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, "the most sophisticated theological image in Marian art," is commonly presented as a young woman clothed in the sun, standing on a crescent moon with twelve stars around her head.93 These symbols are based on the Book of Revelation (12:1) in which John saw "a woman clothed in the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars." Marina Warner states that the Immaculate Conception:

stood for Mary's participation in the victory of Christ over Satan, for her appearance heralded the battle between Michael and 'the dragon and all his angels', in which the dragon is seized and bound and cast down into a bottomless pit, while the woman flees to the wilderness in safety and her son is snatched up in safety.94

At Santa Maria, the statue of the Virgin on the main

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92 Taylor, 11.
93 Warner, 246.
94 Warner, 247.
altar fits within the prescribed biblical guidelines of Immaculate Conception imagery (Figure 29). As described in Chapter Three, she is a young woman dressed in a pale blue, almost white gown, with a long white lace mantel. Below her feet hangs a silver crescent moon and above her head, a silver halo of stars. Behind her, a stained glass window encapsulates her in a sun-like radiance. Above her stands Michael the Archangel, poised with a sword and an army of angels to battle evil. These apocalyptic overtones were also important symbols of the religious conquest of Mexico. Some scholars, including Patricia Harrington feel that this apocalyptic message was manipulated by the friars in their passion to convert the world before the Second Coming, a time of upheaval and turmoil: "In the Spanish encounter with America there was plenty of death and destruction. The violence was often interpreted in apocalyptic terms - and over it always was the watchful face of the Virgin Mary."

The Sacred Mother Concept

According to Jacques Lafaye, the friars attempted to "substitute Christ's mother, mother of mankind, whose redemption she permitted, for the mother-goddess of the

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95 Harrington, 27-28. For more information regarding the Spanish use of the Virgin Mary as a figurehead for conquest see Stratton.
ancient Mexicans. At Santa Maria, the case is more indicative of iconographic fusion than substitution. The parallels between the Immaculate Conception and Tonantzin are so strong and so convincing that they affective a relatively smooth transition from one sacred mother into another. This fusion was made easier because the natives had a long familiarity with the symbolic significance of a sacred mother. Certain iconographic details of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, as a sacred mother in her own right, were blended with the iconography of Tonantzin to produce a concept that is unique to Mexican Catholicism. In essence, Catholic authorities reconfigured the preexisting mother goddess to fit within the guidelines of Christian dogma. Simultaneously, many iconographic details of Tonantzin were retained in the image of the Virgin. A universal Sacred Mother concept solved an ideological and symbolic problem - that of satisfying the needs of the natives, who at times were resistant to change, and at the same time serving the evangelizing needs of the Spanish monarchy. It is argued that in a distinctly Mexican context, the image of the Virgin on the main altar at Santa Maria symbolizes neither the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, nor exclusively Tonantzin. The image symbolizes a more universal theme that satisfied the needs of both religious systems - a Sacred Mother. Thus, the image of the Virgin at Santa Maria can be understood

96 Lafaye, 215.
through an observation made by Guadalupan scholar Jeanette Peterson:

in spite of the Catholic church’s zealous program of evangelization...the failure to eradicate paganism had become patently clear. The hierarchy acknowledged Indian resistance to domination, both overtly in the forms of uprisings and covertly in the persistence of traditional religious beliefs. Aggressive methods of indoctrination were intensified, including the substitution of new Christian saints for old gods and the incorporation of parallel beliefs and rituals.97

Such an understanding of the Sacred Mother rests on several points of convergence between Tonantzín and the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. Several commonalities not addressed by Rojas Rodriguez find their way into the identity of the Virgin as the Sacred Mother. These interpretations are based on the primary accounts and illustrations of Sahagun and Duran, the Book of Revelation (12:1-17), and modern-day interpretations of the Immaculate Conception and Tonantzín. The following points are examined: 1) the mother figure as creative principle, 2) immaculate conception and the birth of a Saviour figure, 3) apocalyptic imagery and the mother figure as an omen of a new age, 4) the relevance of serpent imagery, and 5) physical similarities between the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, Cihuacoatl, and Coatlicue.

According to legend, both Tonantzín and the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception were conceived of at the

97 Peterson, 39.
beginning of time. As Ometeotl, Tonantzin was the primary force that guided the universe, and was the "source of life and all things." 98 In the Legend of the Suns, an Aztec chronicle of the origin of the universe, Cihuacoatl was instrumental in the creation of human beings:

then he (Quetzalcoatl) gathered them together, picked them up and wrapped them. Then he carried them to Tamoanchan. And when he had brought them, the one named Quilazti, Cihuacoatl, ground them up. Then she put them into a jade bowl and Quetzalcoatl bled his penis on them. 99

Similarly, the same can be said of the Virgin. She is often referred to as prefigured by Eve, the first woman. Warner again notes, "...the Incarnation of the godhead had overturned the Old Covenant of sin and death (and) found one of its loveliest images in the concept of the Virgin who gives birth to the Redeemer. She is the second Eve, mother of all the living, in a new spiritual sense." 100

Ingham, in discussing the Virgin of Guadalupe apprises the connection between Eve and Tonantzin:

A fusion of the Virgin and Tonantzin makes a measure of symbolic sense. Tonantzin was an Eve-like goddess and Mary is understood to be the second Eve. Eve was innocent, and therefore, much in the mold of Mary, until she was tempted by the serpent. Mary, the second Eve, triumphed

98 Miguel Leon-Portilla, La filisophia nahuatl estudiada en sus fuentes (Mexico City, n.p., 1959), n. 13. as cited in Lafaye, 213.


100 Warner, 59.
over the serpent and invoked Eve’s pre-fall innocence; she complements the Eve of the Fall.101

The Virgin is also prefigured by other Old Testament figures who did not assist God in the creation of man, but whose presence by him at the conception of the universe is strongly felt. As Marina Warner notes, the Immaculate Conception is also:

...the figure of Wisdom in the Bible. Wisdom is the beloved of God from all eternity and says of herself: ‘He created me from the beginning before the world and I shall never fail’ (Ecclesiasticus 24:9). Predestined and incapable of error, Mary was conceived in all purity in the mind of the creator, like the birth of an idea...102

A second prominent similarity is the concept of immaculate conception and virgin birth. Both Tonantzin and the Immaculate Conception were virgins who were themselves conceived by divine intervention and who also both conceived sons divinely. Tonantzin’s role as Ometeotl, much like the Immaculate Conception, suggests both spiritual and physical perfection.103 Saint Anne conceived the Virgin after lamenting her barrenness and “an electric impulse of life (the Virgin) miraculously passed between

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102 Warner, 247.
103 In categorizing different members of native society, de Sahagun notes that, “the good maiden is yet a virgin, mature, clean, unblemished, pious, pure of heart, benign, chaste, candid, well disposed.” See de Sahagun, Florentine Codex Book Ten, 46.
Joachim (the Virgin's father) and Anne when they ran to meet each other after the angel's news."\textsuperscript{104}

Both the Virgin and Coatlicue were instrumental in redeeming the world by the way of the virgin births of savior-figures. According to Aztec legend, Coatlicue gave birth to the god Huitzilopochtli after being impregnated by a miraculous feather that she picked up while sweeping the floor of the temple.\textsuperscript{105} Springing from her head fully formed, Huitzilopochtli defeated his envious sister/aunt Coyolxauhqui and become one of the most revered gods in the central Mexican pantheon. Like other members of the pantheon, his role is not clearly defined. Huitzilopochtli is "partially fused with Tezcatlipoca and seemingly displays stellar as well igneous associations. Huitzilpochtli was au fond, the divine embodiment of the ideal, Mexica warrior-leader: young valiant, all-triumphant."\textsuperscript{106} As such, he was honored with four festivals during the year and is closely associated with blood sacrifice.\textsuperscript{107} Duran observed that "some (festivals) resemble those of our Christian religion."\textsuperscript{108}

Likewise, through the divine intervention of God, the

\textsuperscript{104} Warner, 239. Parentheses by author.
\textsuperscript{105} Sahagun, Florentine Codex Book 3, 1-3.
\textsuperscript{106} Nicholson, 426.
\textsuperscript{107} The festivals of Huitzilopochtli are Toxcatl (April 23), Tlaxochimaco (July 12), Teotleco (September 10) and Panquetzaliztli (November 9). See C.A. Burland, The Gods of Mexico (New York: G. Putnam and Sons, 1967), 79.
Virgin Mary restored grace to humanity through the birth of Jesus Christ. The Virgin received the message of God from the Archangel Gabriel and instantaneously conceived the Saviour. Jesus, son of God, the creative principle, offered his own body so that mankind could find salvation. Like Huitzilopochtli, he is associated with blood sacrifice because of the Crucifixion. In this manner, for example, Easter can be seen as comparable to the festivals to Huitzilopochtli in their emphasis on divine resurrection.

However, while the maternal qualities of the Virgin and Tonantzin are inherent, they share apocalyptic qualities. Each can be interpreted as portents of a new age, that signals spiritual or societal change. A weeping, wailing Cihuacoatl was the sixth of eight signs to the Aztecs that their empire would fall. According to Sahagun:

> often a woman was heard (as) she went weeping and crying out. **Loudly did she call out at night.** She walked about saying, 'O my beloved sons, now we are about to go!' Sometimes she said: 'O my beloved sons, whither shall I take you?'

As the "woman clothed in the sun" from the book of Revelation (12), the Immaculate Conception signifies a new age - that of the Second Coming of Christ. After confronting the demon who had seven heads and ten horns, she "brought forth a man-child, who was to rule all nations with an iron rod: and her child was caught up unto God and to his throne." (Revelation 12:1-6). An apocalyptic woman

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109 Sahagun, *Florentine Codex* Book 12, 2. Sahagun identifies this woman as "(the demon) Ciuacoatl" See de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex* Book 8, 3.
would therefore have been attractive to the natives for they would have associated a momentous change in their culture with a woman bearing the message. As Harrison says, "... (as) the Aztecs at that time were as apocalyptic as some of the Spaniards, it is likely that they also attached to the image of Mary apocalyptic significance."\textsuperscript{110}

An additional point of convergence is serpent imagery. Serpents are present in the iconography of Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue, or present during the process of creation or destruction, as in the case of the Virgin. Cihuacoatl is the 'woman of the snake', and in this guise as serpent-woman participated in the creation of humankind as recorded in the \textit{Legend of the Suns}. Again, as the serpent-woman she portends the end of the Aztec nation. Coatlicue, the 'woman with the skirt of snakes,' also has generative connotations as she miraculously conceived Huitzilopochtli. Thus, in central Mexican belief, the serpent has strong agricultural, maternal and apocalyptic significance.\textsuperscript{111}

Similarly, Eve, the prefigurement of the Virgin, although not the serpent herself, was tempted by a serpent, the devil, in the Garden of Eden. This involvement with the serpent led to original sin and caused women to bring forth children in pain and men to toil by the sweat of the faces (\textit{Genesis 3:1-24}). During the Apocalypse, the Virgin again confronts the serpent, who tries to escape with her newborn

\textsuperscript{110} Harrington, 29. Parentheses by author.

\textsuperscript{111} For more information regarding the significance of the serpent in central Mexico, see Karl Taube, \textit{Aztec and Maya Myths} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).
son. Confronted by Michael the Archangel, the serpent is ultimately cast into Hell. Similar to the arrangement of the Annunciation and the Holy Trinity in the crossing of the church, the configuration of the main altar recreates the Apocalypse and constantly replays the battle of good and evil. The association with the serpent at Santa Maria is implied, even if the serpent is not physically present. The serpent of Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue now symbolizes the old religion in constant confrontation with Christianity. Walking towards the main altar, the pagan religion, like the “dragon that stands before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child” is cast into Hell, time and again by Michael the Archangel. He stands ever ready, atop the altar with the sword and army his of angels (Revelation 12:1-17). Interestingly, while there is no serpent shown under the feet of the Virgin on the main altar, in Spain and Mexico, many painted representations of the Immaculate Conception are shown treading on serpents (Figures 50 and 32).

The fifth and final point of convergence is that of physical similarities between certain attributes. Rojas Rodriguez depends solely on the zoomorphic image of Coatlicue for interpretation (Figure 51). As Coatlicue, the goddess is portrayed with a double snake head, pendant breasts, and a necklace of human heads and hands. She has claws on her hands and feet. On the back of the sculpture are depictions of conch shells, which Adela Fernandez
interprets as symbols of fertility. In this image, Rojas Rodriguez sees all earth mothers when he states:

in her, many gods and goddesses have been associated and alluded to by symbols. According to our observations, among the many things which Coatlicue is one is of interest—a capacity of synthesis, putting together various elements and hence having a variety of meanings.

Rojas Rodriguez feels that devotion to this image “explains the success of the Spanish in replacing one cult with another, taking care that the characteristics of the old gods remained,” because of this inclination towards synthesis. While synthesis is evident in this image of Coatlicue, and her symbols are some of the most important to central Mexican philosophy, Rojas Rodriguez does not consider the impact of other images of Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue that were used to illustrate the texts of Sahagun or Duran. Neither chronicler refers specifically to the stone image of Coatlicue, and both provided more human depictions of the goddesses. Clearly, the native informants of Sahagun and Duran described the goddesses in human and not zoomorphic terms.

In Tonantzin’s manifestation as Cihuacoatl, Sahagun describes her as being “covered with chalk, like a court lady, with obsidian ear-plugs. She was in white, having garbed herself in white, in pure white. Her tightly wound

112 Fernandez, 55.
113 Rojas Rodriguez, 20.
114 Rojas Rodriguez, 20.
hairdress rose like two horns above her head.” He provides an illustration of Cihuacoatl in the Florentine Codex Book One (Figure 52). Diego Duran, writing in 1576, describes Cihuacoatl as being of stone, having “a huge open mouth and ferocious teeth. The hair on her head was long and bulky and she was clad in womanly garb—skirt, blouse and mantel—all white” (Figure 53). An illustration of Coatlicue in the Florentine Codex Book Three shows her shortly after the birth of Huitzilopochtli (Figure 54). She is dressed in white with a skirt of writhing serpents around her waist. In Sahagun’s Primeros Memoriales, both Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue are represented as women dressed in white. Cihuacoatl stands ready with a blue weaving stick but is devoid of serpent imagery in this representation. Coatlicue has a serpent around her waist and holds a staff that is made of a serpent with its head facing the earth (Figures 55 and 54).

A comparison of the clothing of the Virgin and Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue is quite striking and provides additional evidence of iconographic fusion. First, like Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue in Sahagun and Duran, the image of the Virgin on the main altar of Santa Maria is also clad in white. A long white, removable lace mantle covers a pale blue, almost white dress. The white clothing of the Virgin of Santa Maria provides a further departure from other European or traditional images of the Immaculate

115 Sahagun, Florentine Codex, Book One, 3.
Conception. In Spain, most Immaculate Conceptions are depicted wearing a white dress accompanied by a deep navy blue mantle (Figures 55 and 56). When the Immaculate Conception was transferred to Mexico, her dress underwent an alteration; from white dress and navy mantle, to red dress and blue mantle. The Mexican *tota pulchra* paintings, mentioned in Chapter Three, illustrate this change. Wearing this color combination of red and blue, these Immaculate Conceptions are more closely associated with the Virgin of Guadalupe than to the Virgin at Santa Maria (Figures 31, 32 and 33). When discussing the clothing of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Virgilio Elizondo states that the blue-green of the mantle is "reserved for the great God, Omecihuatl" and "the red dress was associated with "the spilled blood of sacrifice, the color of Huitzilopochtli."\(^{117}\) The color white may have been held in reverence by the people of Tonantzintla, not only because of the dress of Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue, but because of the proximity of the village to the volcano Iztaccihuatl, the "White Woman."\(^{118}\) Located next to the volcano Popocatepetl, "the Smoking Mountain," and clearly visible from the village of Tonantzintla, Iztaccihuatl is steeped

\(^{117}\) Virgilio Elizondo, *La Morenita: The Evangelizer of the Americas* (San Antonio: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1980), 1-3 as cited in Rodriguez 30. Although it has been stated that Tonantzin has direct connections with Omecihuatl and Huitzilopochtli, the above connections are through relationship and manifestation and not color symbolism.

in legend and reverence. According to Duran, Iztaccihuatl was not only a volcano but a goddess to whom much devotion was paid and “because of their foolishness, great crudeness, blindness and brutish ignorance, (they built) temples and shrines for her in the cities.”  

Shrines to her were also located on the slopes of the volcano. 

A clear distinction can be drawn then, between images of the Virgin clad in blue and red representing the Virgin of Guadalupe and images of the Virgin of Santa Maria, dressed primarily in white, who symbolizes the Sacred Mother.

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Chapter V
Conclusion

It has been argued herein that the image of the Virgin at Santa Maria symbolizes neither the Immaculate Conception nor Tonantzin exclusively, but is a combination of both - a Sacred Mother. Because the people of Tonantzintla had a tradition of an omnipotent mother figure in place, a fusion of Old and New World iconographies was achieved.

The Immaculate Conception and Tonantzin share a symbolic ancestry, that of Sacred Mothers, and eternally participate in an iconographic dialogue. Concepts of the nature of the Sacred Mother as the mother of man, mother of a Savior, and the harbinger of a new age were important themes both in the Old and New Worlds. The Christian Sacred Mother, the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, was reconfigured into the Sacred Mother of Santa Maria, who, although in many ways Christian on the exterior, possesses symbolic qualities that were deeply entrenched in native thought.

It is difficult to know to what degree those who sculpted and dressed the statue of the Virgin had a knowledge of the texts and illustrations of Sahagun or Duran. It is more probable that they had a knowledge of the many iconographic complexities of Tonantzin based on local tradition. They would have been familiar with the
symbolic complexities of their mother goddess, including the importance of the color white, the importance of the serpent, the mother figure as virgin and omen, and her origins at the beginning of time. As new Christians under the guidance of the Franciscans, they would have been equally cognizant of the iconography of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. The Sacred Mother of Santa Maria is evidence that the natives did not simply "allow" the friars to replace Tonantzin with the Immaculate Conception. During a time of subjugation, oppression and wide-spread epidemics, the natives were able to retain many iconographic details of their revered mother goddess, while simultaneously worshiping within Christian constructs.

The Sacred Mother of Santa Maria is a unique marriage of pagan and Christian iconography, philosophy and imagery. The Sacred Mother was given a new name, 'La Purísima Concepción,' and was clothed in the style of European fashion. The color symbolism, however, has central Mexican symbolic significance. The gentle nature of the Immaculate Conception was superimposed onto Tonantzin. The Sacred Mother is no longer to be feared like the goddesses of pre-Hispanic times; she is now kind and forgiving. As the natives did for Tonantzin, the Sacred Mother is still offered bunches of flowers, symbolizing "the first harvests of the season."121 This further ties the Sacred Mother with the earth in ways that the Catholic Virgin was not

121 Rubial Garcia, 17.
associated. The Son of the Sacred Mother is a Savior who now does not demand the blood sacrifice of his devotees, but sacrifices his own body for the salvation of the world. The new world that the Sacred Mother portends is one of ultimate peace and spiritual harmony, although the destruction of a familiar way of life precedes it, like the fall of the Aztec empire. Most significantly, the serpents of Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue now symbolize the old religion, and thus by the arrangement of the main altar, Christianity and the old belief system eternally engage in battle with one another.

William Madsen noted that "Compromise marked the trend of religious change in the Valley of Mexico. Acceptance of an alien religion must be accomplished through (a) coalescence of forms..." thus, the Sacred Mother is one of ultimate iconographic balance between the subjugated and the conqueror.\textsuperscript{122} The result is a testament to the strength and flexibility of native iconography and belief systems to adapt to and to accommodate foreign symbol systems. It is also a reflection on the points of symbolic convergence with Old World religious belief systems. What is even more striking, is the adaptability of the Church to draw on iconographic similarities between these Sacred Mothers to convince the natives that they should accept Christian ethics of salvation and Redemption. The clergy were willing to relinquish minor details of the Immaculate

\textsuperscript{122} Madsen, \textit{Christo-Paganism}, 173.
Conception and accept iconographic details of a goddess that they conceived of as a ‘devil’ in order to accomplish their mission of conversion. Ultimately, the Sacred Mother of Santa Maria is, as Elizabeth Weismann notes a “demonstration of what happens when cultures meet.” In this way, the central Mexican goddess Tonantzin and the Catholic Virgin of the Immaculate Conception eternally converse in a cultural and iconographic dialogue to create a third mother figure, who is the embodiment of similar religious, social, and cultural themes.

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A. Saint Christopher
B. Christ Carrying the Cross
C. Saint Nicholas of Tolentino
D. Unidentified Female Saint
E. Saint Francis of Assisi
F. Saint Sebastian
G. Saint Joseph
H. Christ as the Good Shepherd
I. Saint James of Acala
J. Saint Anthony of Padua
K. Saint Augustin
L. Saint Jerome
M. Saint Gregory
N. Saint Ambrose
O. Saint Mark

P. Saint John

Q. Saint Matthew

R. Saint Luke

1. Baptistry

2. Chapel

3. Altar to Saint John Nepomuc

4. Altar to Saint Anthony of Padua

5. Altar to the Wounds of Christ

6. Altar to the Passion of Christ

7. Altar with the Virgin’s Parents, Virgin Martyrs and other unidentified saints
Diagram 2. Marian Emblemata and Images of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception at Santa Maria Tonantzintla.
DIAGRAM TWO

Marian Emblemata and Images of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception at Santa Maria Tonantzintla

A. The Fountain of the Garden
B. The House of Loreto
C. The Well of Living Waters
D. The Palm of Cades
E. The Fountain of the Garden
F. The Cedar of Lebanon
G. The Well of Living Waters
H. The Door to Heaven
I. The Mirror without Stain

1. The Dove of the Holy Spirit
2. The Emblem of the Virgin
3. The Crown of the Virgin
4. The Descending Child
5. The Dove of the Holy Spirit
6. God the Father

7. Resurrected Christ

AA. The Virgin and Child, Facade

BB. The Virgin, Vestibule Door

CC. The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, Choirloft Ceiling

DD. The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, Main Altar

EE. The Virgin of Guadalupe

FF. Altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe
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