

Meet the devoted Coachella Valley Catholics leading the longest pilgrimage in the United States

[Alena Maschke](#), The Desert Sun Published 5:33 p.m. PT Dec. 12, 2017



(Photo: Omar Ornelas/The Desert Sun)

At 5 a.m. on a brisk Tuesday morning, the sacristy of Our Lady of Solitude Church in Palm Springs is packed to the brim. Bulbs of people have built around every entrance to the church, a room neighboring the sacristy is overflowing with people eating pan dulce and sipping hot coffee from Styrofoam cups. The sound of a mariachi band spills onto the street.

Every year on Dec. 12, Latinos - especially those of Mexican descent- celebrate La Virgen de Guadalupe, an apparition of the Virgin Mary whose roots are deeply seated in Mexican culture.

In the Coachella Valley, believers of La Virgen have been gathering since 2001 for a pilgrimage that is considered the longest in the United States in distance, with pilgrims walking about 30 miles from Palm

Springs to Coachella.

La Virgen de Guadalupe is said to have appeared to an indigenous farmer in 1531, who had converted to Christianity, asking him to have a church built in her honor.

[In the Coachella Valley History Museum's archive, hidden gems are waiting for their time to shine \(/story/life/entertainment/2017/12/12/coachella-valley-history-museums-archive-hidden-gems-waiting-their-time-shine/875276001/\)](#)

When the farmer, San Juan Diego, brought her request to the archbishop in Mexico City, his plea was supported by a miracle: the image of the Virgin had been burned onto the cloth he was wearing, the legend goes.

To this day, tens of thousands travel to Mount Tepeyac, on the outskirts of Mexico City, every year to see the cloth displayed at La Basilica de Guadalupe.

The Coachella Valley pilgrimage was initiated out of a private bible study, Irene Mora, a founding member of the organizing Comité Guadalupano remembered. "People go all the way to Mexico City to see the real image," Mora said. Her sister in law came up with an idea: Why not have a pilgrimage right here?



Volunteers begin the 17th annual "Walk of Faith" from Our Lady of Solitude in Palm Springs to the city of Coachella. The 32-mile walk is in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe which draws thousands every year. (Photo: Omar Ornelas/The Desert Sun)

"She said: I want to do it for people who don't have money," Mora recounted. "And papers," Jesus Mora, her husband, added. While many immigrants believe in La Virgen, a lack of financial resources or legal immigration status may prevent them from taking the trip to Mexico.

Mora's niece, Marisol Guerrero, still remembers her first time participating in the march. "When I was younger, I remember hearing about people in Mexico who would actually go," Guerrero recounts. Later, when she was teaching in Coachella, her students would tell her about their parents making pilgrimages when they still lived in Mexico.

She was especially touched by the stories of people offering food to the pilgrims during their trek. "Knowing where the people are coming from and knowing the disadvantages that they have- including their immigration status for a large part of the community- there's no way to express the feeling that you get," Guerrero said.

Madre de los inmigrantes - Mother of the immigrants

The Virgin is an important part of everyday life for many Latino immigrants in the U.S. Especially for Mexican immigrants, "La Virgen morena" – the dark-skinned Virgin – takes on a motherlike role, uniting indigenous beliefs and Catholic spirituality.

"It's partially dominance of Mexican culture, but also her association with the oppressed, the downtrodden," explained Charlene Villaseñor Black, Professor of Chicano/a Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Our Lady of Guadalupe has a long history of accompanying those who fought against oppression and for the independence of Latinos, starting with the Mexican War of Independence against Spain and continuing today.

"She was an emblem for farm workers and she is now becoming an emblem of the immigrant rights movement," Villaseñor Black said.



Many pilgrims at the Coachella Valley parade were sporting t-shirts that read "Mother of immigrants, increase the faith of the new generation" in both Spanish and English.

Many believe in the power of La Virgen to relay their pleas to God, to help loved ones regain health after illness or to overcome tough times in their lives. "We go to our mom, so God can give us the miracle," Irene Mora said. "That's the only way I can explain [it]."

In order to thank the Virgin for hearing their pleas, many of the believers promise to take on a pilgrimage in her honor.

For 26-year-old Ali Rosario, it is his fifth year walking in the Coachella Valley march. After suffering several health issues as a child, Rosario fell deeply ill at the age of 11. After a tonsil removal surgery, he wasn't able to eat. As he continued to lose strength, he eventually lost his ability to walk.

Catholics walk the 17th annual "Walk of Faith' from Our Lady of Solitude in Palm Springs Virgin of Guadalupe to the city of Coachella. The 32-mile walk is in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe which draws thousands every year. (Photo: Omar Ornelas/The Desert Sun)

More: [The history of Mexican families in the Coachella Valley \(/story/life/2017/04/20/history-mexican-families-coachella-valley/305574001/\)](https://www.desertsun.com/story/life/2017/04/20/history-mexican-families-coachella-valley/305574001/)

Rosario's mother took him back to the Oaxacan village where he lived in as a child in Southern Mexico. There, a shaman prayed to the Virgin Mary, asking her to help him regain his health. "I said: Hopefully I can go back some day," Rosario remembered.

Years after his illness passed, the family finally went back. Two planes and several bus trips took them to Oaxaca, from where they brought back a shrine of La Señora de Juquila, the patron of Oaxaca and another apparition of the Virgin Mary.

For five years, Rosario has carried the shrine with him on the walk from Palm Springs to Coachella. To believe in the power of the Virgin Mary is part of growing up Mexican, Rosario said. "I think it's en-rooted in us through our parents," he concluded.

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The many faces of Mary

For Father Juan Pablo Romero, the new Spanish-speaking priest at Our Lady of Solitude in Palm Springs, this will be the first time participating in the pilgrimage. "Obviously, because I'm a young priest, I have to participate," he echoed the expectations of his congregation.

Originally from Colombia, Father Romero became more familiar with the celebration around La Virgen de Guadalupe when working in Chicago, home to another large procession in her honor.

"In Colombia, we don't venerate the Virgen de Guadalupe a lot," Father Romero said. "But when they told me about this caminata, this big walk, that blew my mind."

While the apparition – or sighting – of Guadalupe is the most celebrated version of Virgin Mary in Mexico and Central America, similar legends are known throughout Latin America.

In Colombia and Venezuela, Our Lady of Chiquinquirá is celebrated every year on July 9th. "I identify her with the humble people, the simple people, the poor, with the people suffering," Father Romero explained.

The different apparitions of Virgin Mary served an important role in forging the colonial and post-colonial identities of many Latin American countries.

"I know that there is one avocation of this Virgin Mary in every house, in every Mexican house," Father Romero said. "That is a mother, a sister, a daughter. She is our projection of the Virgin Mary."

La Virgen De Guadalupe appeared on Mount Tepeyac, where indigenous people had worshipped Tonantzin, a goddess equivalent to 'Mother Earth'.

In Catholicism, the Virgin Mary carries a similar role. "If we are the body of Christ, and she is his mother of Christ: she is our mother," explained Gloria Falcão Dodd, Director of Academic Programs at the International Marian Research Institute.

La Virgen de Guadalupe, an apparition of Virgin Mary that had been described as having indigenous features and speaking Nahuatl, offered an opportunity to unite both indigenous identities and colonial Catholicism.

"Devotion to her is a strategy to make the church your own," Villaseñor Black said.

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