

The “Mother Church” of Mexican Catholicism in Houston *By Natalie Garza*



The shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe is located in the courtyard of the church and school grounds. It depicts the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego atop Mount Tepeyac in Mexico.

Photo by Natalie Garza.

Church Institutional History

On August 18, 1912, a priest celebrated the first mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in Houston’s Second Ward on the second floor of a two-story wood-frame structure located on the corner of what was then Marsh and Runnels Streets. Three weeks later, on September 8, 1912, the school at Our Lady of Guadalupe opened on the first floor of the same building. These events marked the beginning of the Catholic Church’s mission to the Spanish-speaking community of Houston. Bishop Nicholas Gallagher of the Galveston diocese entrusted the Oblates of Mary Immaculate with the task of ministering to the Mexican and Mexican American community in Houston because priests from this order were “known to have the spirit and the tradition of working in the most difficult mis-

sions.”¹ Upon their arrival in 1911, the Oblates first settled in the Magnolia Park neighborhood where they formed a church named Immaculate Conception. This Church served as the home base for the Oblates, but was not a Mexican national church.

Ethnic Mexicans who chose to attend mass at Immaculate Conception faced the same discrimination confronted at every other Anglo Catholic Church in the city at the time. Mexicans were either forced to sit in the back pews of the church or refused entry with signs warning, “Mexicans prohibited.”² Parishioner of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Carmen Ramirez was one of eight children who grew up in the Sixth Ward on Sawyer Street near St. Joseph’s Catholic Church. Her family walked to Our Lady of Guadalupe every Sunday because as she recalled,

In the past San Jose [St. Joseph's] didn't welcome Mexicans ... me and the other girls from the neighborhood would go to church [during the week] and they would ask, 'Why don't you go to your church?', a Mexican church ... We sat in the very back along with a black gentleman ... And one time, my mother wanted to put my brother in school [at St. Joseph's] but they didn't allow Mexicans in the school either. The nun closed the door on my mom ... They didn't want Mexicans in the school, nor did they want us at mass. And look now, it's very different, isn't it?³

The institutional Church responded to this segregation by setting up Mexican national churches “so as not to offend Anglos accustomed to separation of the races.”⁴ For this reason, as the Oblate priests organized the church and school at Immaculate Conception, four miles away in the Second Ward they were simultaneously establishing the church and school of Our Lady of Guadalupe to serve the ethnic Mexican population.

For most of the nineteenth century, the Mexican population in Houston remained very small. In 1910, only about two thousand ethnic Mexicans lived in Houston, but the population grew quickly following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920).⁵ The first concentrated settlement of ethnic Mexicans in Houston was in “el Segundo” barrio or Second Ward. Subsequent populations of Mexicans began to settle where employment opportunities became available in Magnolia Park, the Northside (Fifth Ward), the Sixth and First Wards.⁶ For this burgeoning community, Our Lady of Guadalupe served as the only Catholic Church that welcomed Mexicans, tolerating their cultural traditions of Catholicism.⁷ Many Mexicans traveled long distances to attend mass in the Second Ward church. Life-long parishioner, Petra Guillen left Mexico with her mother and grandmother when she was ten months old to join an uncle already living in Baytown. She remembered when her family traveled by ferry to attend mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe, until they moved to the Second Ward because her grandmother wanted to be closer to the church.⁸ Many others walked from the various wards, and some rode the streetcar.

In 1919, the congregation of Our Lady of Guadalupe got its first Spanish speaking priest, Father Esteban de Anta from Spain. He was among the initial group of Oblates of Mary Immaculate to organize missionary work in Houston and served as the third pastor of the parish. In this position, he ministered to the broader ethnic Mexican community in

Sister Mary Benitia Vermeersch, C.D.P., by the monument dedicated to her in 1938 when she left Houston after 23 years of service. In the background is Providence Home, Catechist home.

Photo courtesy of Petra Guillen.



Houston. The Catholic Church did not have enough Spanish speaking personnel to minister to the growing population of Mexicans in Houston. During the 1920s, Mexican priests and nuns fled to the United States to escape religious persecution, but they often went to well established Mexican American cities like San Antonio.⁹ Father Esteban had two tools that contributed to the growth of the Catholic Church within Houston's ethnic Mexican community: the Mexican people and Sister Benitia Vermeersch.

History of Our Lady of Guadalupe School

Sister Benitia was a member of the Congregation of Divine Providence, which ran the school at Our Lady of Guadalupe. She was assigned to the school in 1915 because of her ability to speak Spanish and her knowledge of Mexican culture. A native of Belgium, Sister Benitia migrated with her parents and two brothers to the United States when she was still a child. After both parents died as a result of an accident in 1893, she was eventually placed in St. Peter and St. Joseph's orphanage in San Antonio, Texas. As a teenager, Sister Benitia accompanied the sisters who ran the orphanage on missionary trips to Saltillo, Mexico, where she gained knowledge of and appreciation for Mexican culture.¹⁰ Upon her return, at the age of eighteen, Sister Benitia joined the Congregation of Divine Providence. Over the course of her twenty-three years of service to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and School, Sister Benitia became very important to the parish community who dedicated a monument to her when she was transferred to San Antonio. The text of the dedication reads, “Magnificat Anima mea Dominum. She hath opened her hand to the needy and stretched out her hands to the poor, and hath not eaten her bread idle. Lovingly dedicated to Sister Mary Benitia, C.D.P., by the grateful Mexican people of Houston, Texas, May 22, 1938.”¹¹

As a teacher and principal, Sister Benitia saw it as her duty to personally encourage Mexican American families to send their children to Our Lady of Guadalupe School. Under her leadership, attendance at the school increased from 85 students to 428 by 1935.¹² In addition to her personal interaction with the families, Sister Benitia understood the financial hardships within the community. She was known to seek assistance from prominent citizens and businesses in Houston to provide food and funding to the church and school. Through Sister Benitia's solicitation, the school became more than just a place to learn; it became a resource for the entire family. Students often took home a loaf of bread for their younger siblings, mothers of school children served bread and coffee to the needy, and men of the parish plowed land surrounding the



Catequistas with Sister Mary Helen. Petra Guillen is located in the front row, third from the right. Florencia Lopez is located in the second row, fourth from the right. Florencia became a nun and third grade teacher at Our Lady of Guadalupe School and many generations of students passed through her class. Sister Flo was also known to run the kitchen on Sundays, selling tacos to benefit the school.

Photo courtesy of Charlie Lopez.

school for garden allotments to families in need.¹³ In the early years, Our Lady of Guadalupe School did not charge. When instituted, the tuition rate was minimal at \$0.25 to \$0.50 per pupil during the 1934-35 school year. Parents contributed to the financial support of Our Lady of Guadalupe School through fundraisers such as tamale sales, bazaars, and beauty queen contests.¹⁴ This type of school fundraising remains an important financial resource.

Students at the school learned geography, English, history, arithmetic, and religion. The sisters had a reputation for strictness. Some aspects of Mexican American youth culture were derided at the school, “Children with haircuts like that of *‘pachucos’* will be sent home and will not be re-admitted until they cut their hair.”¹⁵ Former student Vincent Santiago was born in Magnolia Park to a Tejano father and a Mexican mother. His mother’s migration resembled that of many who eventually settled in Houston. She first resided in a well-established Mexican American city (Laredo) then joining a relative who secured employment in Houston, in this case at Southern Pacific Railroad. Santiago explained, “Well, Sisters of the Divine Providence were very concerned about us because we were young and they knew way back in the 1940s [that] jobs were hard to get. They encouraged us

to go to high school, learn as much as we could or not to get in trouble ... to keep on going [on] the right track and that is what I have done.” English was the language of instruction at school and Spanish was prohibited on school grounds. Santiago recalled, “The Sisters of Divine Providence said, ‘When you are in school, speak English. When you are out of school, speak Spanish.’ Simple, very simple.”¹⁶

Catechists of Divine Providence

Sister Benitia did not stop her mission of educating Mexican American youth within the confines of Our Lady of Guadalupe School. Rather, she believed in the need to bring religious education to the broader Mexican community of Houston as part of the larger catechetical movement of the Catholic Church. She recruited young Mexican American women of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish to travel throughout the city and teach catechism to Mexican children attending public school. Originally called the Society of Saint Teresa (1928), the group became the Missionary Catechists of Divine Providence in 1932.

These young women called themselves catequistas and conducted themselves according to a set of rules that resembled the structure of any religious order. They attended

mass daily, studied the Bible, meditated, and abstained from “worldly amusements.”¹⁷ When they went out to teach, the catequistas wore a uniform that was recognized throughout Houston, a black dress with a pleated skirt and white collar and cuffs.¹⁸ Despite this structure, catequistas developed an independence and respect within the community. Petra Guillen came from a household that was very strict. Her mother did not allow her to go outside of the neighborhood.¹⁹ As a catequista, however, she traveled on a streetcar to various parts of the city, visiting family homes in heavily concentrated Mexican American communities. A small room, a backyard, or a porch served as centers where as many as fifteen to twenty public school children gathered to prepare for the sacraments and receive religious instruction from a catequista.²⁰ These classes were taught in Spanish, demonstrating a desire of the church leadership to spread Catholic teachings without concern for cultural assimilation of ethnic Mexicans. During the first three years, the catequistas prepared over 600 children for First Holy Communion. On Sunday mornings, Mexican American children from throughout Houston walked to Our Lady of Guadalupe accompanied by their teacher. On occasion, a truck owner helped transport children who traveled farther.²¹

In 1935, a local benefactor funded Providence Home to serve as boarding for the intern catechists. Six young women immediately moved in and lived a modest life that included prayers, daily mass, religious studies, and chores, when they were not out teaching. Carmen Ramirez recalled how the sisters did not waste anything, and Petra Guillen remembered that weekly chores were assigned on a rotating basis. By 1935, the group had forty-one members teaching in fifteen centers to over 1,000 children.²² Many of these women remained devoted and active participants in the Catholic Church throughout their life, and some catequistas became nuns. The legacy of these women was the establishment of an independent order of sisters; the Missionary Catechists of Divine Providence was founded and comprised primarily of ethnic Mexicans and serves as the first of its kind in the United States.²³

Mexican American Community

Church perception of Mexican Catholics is at times condescending with religious leaders criticizing ethnic Mexicans both for their cultural traditions of Catholicism and for their lack of participation in church activities. As late as



Passion of the Christ on the church grounds of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Good Friday, April 14, 1995.

Photo courtesy of Paul Gloria.

1984, a parish report noted that “There seem to have been too many sacraments administered without the proper preparation over the years,” a statement reflecting the belief that Mexican Catholics place less importance on the rituals of the institutional church. This same report decried the lack of leadership taken on by the people, noting that Our Lady of Guadalupe was not viewed as “their” church.²⁴ The history of Mexican Catholicism in Houston proves that this generalization ignores the unique cultural practices that are at the heart of the many ways in which ethnic Mexicans take ownership of and responsibility in the church and by extension their community.

In response to demand, the Oblates established missions in various Mexican neighborhoods throughout Houston. One of these early missions was located in Magnolia Park at the home of Emilio Aranda on the corner of 71st and Navigation Streets. The first floor served as a store. On the second floor, in the family residence, the congregation celebrated mass and the sacraments, taught catechism, and prayed the rosary. In 1926, a new two-story building became the place of worship with the help of funds raised by the community. From the beginning, the Mexican people were integral in the founding of Immaculate Heart of Mary as the first church to develop out of Our Lady of Guadalupe.²⁵

The catequistas facilitated the establishment of other Mexican national churches in Houston. For example, St. Stephen’s (named after the patron saint of Father Esteban) developed out of a catechetical center in the Sixth Ward. Carmen Ramirez recalled, “Well there were a few families that got together and Father Esteban [from] Our Lady of Guadalupe ... used to go over there and have sermons in the



Procession for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Dec. 12, 1998.

Photo courtesy of Paul Gloria.



This window was dedicated by the Vietnamese Community/Clayton Homes. In the 1970s, Our Lady of Guadalupe became the home church to Vietnamese refugees fleeing the war.

Photo by Natalie Garza.

evening and have rosaries out in the yards and all that. We started getting money together and we built a church. We are the founders of Saint Stephen's."²⁶ Other parishes developed from catechetical centers, such as Our Lady of Sorrows in the Fifth Ward. Some churches, like St. Patrick's and St. Joseph's, were entrusted to the Oblates as the population of ethnic Mexicans grew in the community and parishes. In this way, the activism of ethnic Mexicans in the church encouraged the growth of Our Lady of Guadalupe as the "Mother Church" to Mexican American Catholics throughout Houston.

There is a great deal of pride in the work Mexican Americans put into building a church community. Vincent Santiago explained "... whenever we have a bazaar we all

unite and participate to help our church raise money to pay for whatever we need for the church. Like I said before, we are the church."²⁷ Petra Guillen made it clear to her husband when they got married and were later looking for a house that she did not want him to take her away from Guadalupe. When he later contemplated a move to Dallas to follow his job, she reminded him, "Well, you promised you wouldn't take me from Guadalupe. You can go if you want to, but I'm staying." When he argued a church dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe existed in Dallas, she responded: "But it's not my Guadalupe."²⁸ Petra Guillen's response indicates that the importance of the church to her and others went beyond its dedication to the patron of Mexico, but also encompassed its members' connection to the cultural space.

Many parishioners have a cultural connection to the Church, as evidenced by their membership at two parishes, the one they live near and Our Lady of Guadalupe. "They are still coming from all over. They come from Pearland and Magnolia sometimes, from Conroe sometimes. You know they used to live here, and they just want to come."²⁹ Carmen Ramirez, who became active at St. Stephen's after its establishment, remained connected to Our Lady of Guadalupe, "I give \$5 a week in my envelope every week. Even when I was ... living in Sixth Ward I used to love to come over here. I was from Saint Stephen's, but I loved the Guadalupe so I kept coming to Guadalupe all the time."³⁰

The persistence of Mexican cultural Catholicism remains wrapped up in a history of exclusion from the mainstream church, characterized by practices not readily accepted, like *quinceañeras*, *altarcitos*, *posadas*, and *guadalupanas*.³¹ The latter involves the veneration of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which culminates on her feast day on December 12th. On this day, the Church stays open late into the evening and the community celebrates with mariachi, food, and dancing. "When Our Lady of Guadalupe's feast falls on a Sunday, there may be as many as 5,000 people in attendance in the Church."³² On the feast day in 1991, Our Lady of Guadalupe celebrated the dedication and recognition of the space as a State Historical Landmark.

If Our Lady of Guadalupe serves as both an important religious and cultural space for Mexican Catholics, it also holds political importance. In his history of Mexican



The Society of Nocturnal Adoration, organized by Father Esteban De Anta, was comprised of men who prayed overnight in the church, circa 1938.


Photo courtesy of Petra Guillen.

Catholicism in Houston, Roberto Treviño argued that in the early years, individual church leaders worked to improve the material lives of parishioners, but by the 1940s, the institutional church adopted methods of effecting social change.³³ This started with Father Esteban and Sister Benitia, but subsequent priests continued to speak out. Father Anthony Russo criticized the deportation of families who had lived in the U.S. a long time. He also expressed concern for the impact of renewal and development in the area, accepting that old houses should be torn down, but questioned what would happen to the people in the neighborhoods. Father Rick DiLeo also became involved on issues of immigration through Casa Juan Diego, a Catholic Worker Movement Center, which reaches out to immigrants, refugees, and the poor. He started out leading the community in prayer and their Eucharist celebrations and became impressed with the group's views on social justice.³⁴

The parishioners of Our Lady of Guadalupe were equally active in fighting for improved social conditions for their community. During the 1970 school boycotts, Vincent Santiago said, "Oh yes, I participated, I marched with the sign. This is not right . . . This is not justice. We are citizens. We fought for the United States in the armed forces. We are entitled to all of this."³⁵ Petra Guillen stated, "I was an activist. Actually, I used to be with TMO . . . the Metropolitan Organization and we help the Mexicano. We went to fight for their rights when they were not paying them enough for cleaning the offices and things like that."³⁶ The Metropolitan Organization was created in 1980 as a political advocate for the socially disadvantaged and remains particularly outspoken on issues of immigra-

tion rights. It incorporates a conglomeration of religious institutions, and the Catholic Church supports individual parish membership in the TMO. Santiago and Guillen both demonstrated a political consciousness that integrated their moral beliefs with experiences of injustice. These efforts followed in the tradition of those Mexican Americans who demanded equal access to Catholicism in a way that fit their cultural needs.

Conclusion

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate served Our Lady of Guadalupe until 1973, when the priests of the Sacred Heart arrived. Then, in the 1980s, the church became a territorial parish based on geographic boundaries, but it remains heavily Mexican American and Latino based. The school continues to educate children of the neighborhood, even after many Catholic schools have shut down due to low enrollment. Former catequistas Petra Guillen and Carmen Ramirez Santiago. Along with the new immigrants that continue to move into the Second Ward, they signify the continued growth of Our Lady of Guadalupe. As stated in a 1996 parish directory, "Its [Our Lady of Guadalupe's] members compose 5th generation descendants of those who came to Houston in 1911 and those who came last week."³⁷ In 2012, Our Lady of Guadalupe will celebrate its centennial anniversary as the "Mother Church" of Mexican Catholicism in Houston. 

Natalie Garza is a Ph.D. candidate in Latin American history at the University of Houston and director of the University of Houston Oral History Project.

Fiesta Guadalupana, December 12, 2001.

Photo courtesy of Mary Silva.

