

Suspending disbelief: Marian visions

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 28, 2002](#) issue

Ghost Ranch, a Presbyterian haven in New Mexico, in 1968 welcomed its first Catholic speaker, Father Anthony Wilhelm, with whom I was to hold a public conversation. Tony began his days by saying mass in an upper room, before a congregation of Hispanic employees. Couldn't some of the Protestant Ranch-folk drop in some day? he asked. The next morning one stalwart Presbyterian layman, Joe Dempsey of Tulsa, and five little Marty boys and their parents showed up to celebrate.

It was August 15, the Festival of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. (A Presbyterian goat, just a kid, born earlier that day had already received the name "Assumpta.") At the proper moment the priest turned to Dempsey and asked if he would pray a collect. "Marty, what's a collect?" Dempsey whispered. Answer: "One of those short, packed prayers; you invoke God, offer a petition and conclude." Our friend prayed something like this:

"God, as you know, I'm a Protestant. I don't know what the Assumption is, and if I did know, I probably wouldn't agree with the idea." Was he going to be flip? Not at all. He went on: "But when I see what it means among the people gathered here, and what it does for them and through them, I thank you. . . ."

I was later to learn that many mainstream Catholics also do not "agree with the idea" of the Assumption, proclaimed infallibly in 1950. They went along with it hoping it would do something for some Catholics.

This all came to mind when Pope John Paul II in Mexico recently canonized a possibly never-existent Juan Diego. Debates over whether he existed, whether he met the Virgin on a hill and whether she left her imprint on his garment occur not out on the fringes of skeptical anti-Catholic communities, if there still are such. They engage Catholic historians and theologians, with the "probably not's" probably outnumbering the "probables" and "certainlies."

Fifty years ago the media attention given the pope, plus the devotion shown the Virgin and now the saint, would have inspired blue-blooded and red-blooded Protestants alike to denounce it all. My sight may be dimmed and my hearing dulled, but I did try to stay alert and found no blasts against “superstition” and “exploitation” disrupting today’s scene.

What has happened? For one thing the heirs, if any, of blue-blooded mainline Protestant elites are too ecumenically minded to carp. And the red-blooded among evangelical Protestants are too eager to have Catholics as allies on many causes to raise a peep.

For another, the sudden realization that pluralism is here to stay in the U.S. and that Latinos/Latinas, the largest population in this pluralist scope, most of them still with Catholic sensibilities, are our neighbors. They bring their own cultures, which everyone else would do well to understand. The Guadalupe myth is decisive in that context.

Still another factor may be a corollary of pluralism in general. Citizens are losing the sharp edge of judgment against “superstitions” and previously uncongenial expressions of faith. This need not mean simple gullibility or relativism. Whether the saint did or did not exist, we focus, like Dempsey, on what this reverence does for and through those who celebrate. Clarissa Pinkola Estes of Denver, for example, leads a foundation in the name of the Virgin of Guadalupe through which she helps others do good things, especially among young Latinas.

“God, as you know, I’m a Protestant. . . . But I’ve learned to suspend disbelief as I observe. . . .”