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SPEAKER 1: For Mexicans, el Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe, the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, is kind of what Saint Patrick's Day is to the Irish. It's a big deal. The mythology surrounding the Virgin's appearance has created not only a national holiday for Mexicans, but it has also represented a merging of national identity and religious faith.

SPEAKER 2: [SPANISH]

SPEAKER 1: At midnight mass at the Saint Paul Episcopal Denomination Misión El Santo Niño Jesús, about 300 Hispanics came to demonstrate their faith in our Lady of Guadalupe, and later share traditional Mexican food, songs, and dance.

[TRADITIONAL MUSIC PLAYING]

A Mariachi band played traditional Mexican ballads between liturgical readings. And to honor the Mexican-Indian heritage, a group of Aztec dancers made a symbolic offering of themselves to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

This seemingly odd juxtaposition makes sense, if you look at Our Lady of Guadalupe as the link between the old Aztec polytheistic religion of Indian civilization and the modern day Mexico. According to the lore of Guadalupe, in 1531, the Virgin Mary appeared at least twice before a peasant named Juan Diego. She told him to go to the bishop, and tell him to build a temple on the site where she appeared.

It is said that to prove her existence, she left an image of herself imprinted on a piece of cloth. A temple was indeed built. And hundreds of years later, that cloth is said to be the very one that still hangs today in the Basilica de Guadalupe in Mexico City, visited by about 10 million people a year.

The Virgin's visits to Juan Diego in 1531, occurred not long after the Spanish conquest. Some say, the miracle of her visit led to the relatively swift conversion of millions of Aztec Indians to Christianity.

To this day, Mexico remains a predominantly Catholic country. Twin Cities resident, Elisa Cervantes, says the Virgin of Guadalupe is important not only to Mexicans, but to Catholics everywhere. Her daughter, Gabriela Perdomo, translates.

SPEAKER 3: [SPANISH]

TRANSLATOR: It's helpful for her. And she believes in it because the thing is that if you ever have something that you're worrying about, or you need some faith, you always can go to the Virgin, and pray to her. And we always believe in her. And we have faith that she'll eventually come through and help us with whatever we need.

SPEAKER 1: For Mexican-American Beatrice de Santiago, attending the midnight mass in honor of Guadalupe is about maintaining a connection with her culture and heritage.

SPEAKER 4: It means more than anything, family, getting together, feeling the flavor of Mexico, with the drums and the dancers, and the mariachi, and all that. It's just the feeling of it as a connection to our roots.

SPEAKER 1: This is the only Hispanic church in the Episcopal diocese in Minnesota. Bishop for Minnesota, James Jelinek, attended the midnight mass, and led the Eucharist. Jelinek says he believes the culture of Minnesota's churches is responding to the state's increasingly diverse populations.

SPEAKER 5: The question is, how do we take what have been the riches of their spiritual experiences, and utilize those that fit very well with Christianity? That's what we struggle with all the time. And you could see that tonight in the dancing. You could hear it in the style of the music.

SPEAKER 1: Bishop James Jelinek of the Episcopal Church of Minnesota. This is Marisa Helms, Minnesota Public Radio.