

## **Juan Diego's family tree standing tall**

### **After decades of hiding kinship, descendants rise to defend the man from skeptics who question his existence.**

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MEXICO - Raymundo Yebra Soriano, bread maker for four decades in this quiet pueblo, remembers his mother telling him as a child that he was a descendant of Juan Diego, the Mexican Indian who's to become a Catholic saint today.

But being of Indian descent wasn't something one bragged about back then, said Yebra, 70.

"In the past, Juan Diego was treated as somewhat of a joke," Yebra said, hard at work in the Panaderia Santa Isabel on the outskirts of Mexico City. "They said that if you behaved badly, you would start to look like Juan Diego.

"And that wasn't a good thing."

That prejudice is waning slowly. Contributing to its demise is the canonization by Pope John Paul II of the Indian peasant to whom the Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared in 1531.

But the canonization also has ignited a passionate debate about the very existence of Juan Diego, who some factions of the Catholic Church have refused to accept.

Included among the skeptics is the former abbot of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

Some historians say there isn't a shred of evidence there ever was a Juan Diego.

But Yebra, who kept his putative kinship to the soon-to-be saint quiet for decades, was quick to join a burgeoning movement seeking to bring credibility to the legend of the Indian craftsman and widower.

"Now, we're getting respect," he said. "We're getting at least a little respect."

Four years ago, the name of Yebra's mother, Maria Juana Soriano Pardo Gama, was listed in newspapers as one of Juan Diego's many descendants, traced in a genealogy created by Enrique Salazar y Salazar and two anthropologists.

Maria Juana Soriano had died in 1983, but Yebra immediately became interested.

The genealogy indicated his family was descended from Juan Cortes, the youngest son of Juan Diego.

"I wasn't surprised," he said.

Salazar, who began his research more than two decades ago, delivered his published genealogy and a book, called "The Messenger of the Virgin," containing public documents, such as birth and death certificates and Spanish land records, to the pope in October 2000.

"The existence of Juan Diego has been proven," Salazar said by phone Tuesday. "We're resting assured that we've proven details about his life and his descendents. The pope is in complete agreement, and the project was a success."

How responsible that research may have been in bringing about the canonization is debatable. But Yebra asserts sainthood was the intended outcome through two decades of work.

Meanwhile, he has helped locate other descendants of Juan Diego; for instance, the Brito line in the pueblo of Tulpeticlac.

Yebra's wife, Simona Melendez, 70, begins to weep when asked what her husband's relationship to Juan Diego means.

"I'm so pleased with it," said the tiny woman, who for decades has run a store next to her husband's bakery.

"He's always been such a hard worker, a master bread maker. Then people began to believe, and they gave him a portrait of Juan Diego."

Yebra's face indeed may be familiar to devotees of Juan Diego: He bears a striking resemblance to at least two portraits of the Indian hanging at the Basilica of Guadalupe.

He's been told he's the spitting image of a 16th-century painting of Juan Diego located in Michoacan, as well as another painting in the nearby Church of Santa Maria of Chiconautla.

"Twice, I've gone to Chiconautla to see the painting," Yebra said. "Both times, the church has been closed."

Though the Basilica of Guadalupe's latest representation of Juan Diego looks more European than Mexican Indian, it does echo Yebra's features.

"A lot of people don't like that portrait," said the amenable bread maker, known in Tola as Raymundo el Panadero. "But each person makes his Juan Diego to his own taste."

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