

**Vega P. Fahey Oral History Interview –JFK#1, 1997**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Fahey, (1903 - 2010), provides her account of President Kennedy's visit to the Shrine of Guadalupe during his trip to Mexico, June 30 - July 2, 1962, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Vega P. Fahey

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Oral History Interview

with

VEGA P. FAHEY

1997

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Written Statement

For the John F. Kennedy Library

It was June 1962. John F. Kennedy and his wife were to visit Mexico June 30 to July 2. My husband, Charles [Charles E. Fahey], and I sat in the library of our Mexico City apartment with several other Americans discussing a newspaper article giving the schedule and itinerary of our President. His visit would end on a Sunday and he would attend Mass at a small chapel near the airport, then depart immediately for Washington.

Having lived among the Mexican people for 14 years, this low profile finale to an historic visit didn't sit well. Why the obscure chapel for Mass? Why not pay a visit to the one and only

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home of the Mexican soul, the famous Shrine of Guadalupe. We realized the embarrassment this would present to the Mexican government. Its Constitution of 1917 outlawed the presence of Mexican officials at a public religious service. The president of Mexico could not accompany our president to such a service.

But governments come and go. The people remain forever. Why not write a letter to Washington suggesting a change in itinerary? We did just that: "If you, Mr. President, wish to reach the hearts of the Mexican people, visit their shrine." We dispatched it to Kenneth O'Donnell, appointments secretary to President Kennedy.

Whether or not the message ever reached the president or had any effect on the events that followed, I will never know. But

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much to our consternation and delight, a short time later, banner headlines appeared in the Spanish language newspapers:

“KENNEDY TO VISIT  
SHRINE OF GUADALUPE”

The news was electric. People talked about it in the streets, joyful with anticipation. It was a different story in Mexican government circles at the American Embassy. Dispatches crackled like fireworks between Mexico City and Washington. Close advisors in the American Embassy and Washington tried to dissuade Kennedy. Our reliable friends at the embassy said he stood firm: “If I can’t worship in the place of my choice,” he said, “I will cancel the visit!” In spite of the heavy bombardment, his wishes and that of the Mexican people at large carried the day.

The Mexican government compromised, but details of the services at the Shrine were explicit: absolutely no music, no

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real celebration. Low key was the word. President Kennedy graciously requested no priedieus be set out for him or his wife, nor would he kneel on special padding to spare his back.

As to a low key event, things took a different turn. Special tickets were distributed. I still have mine mounted in my Mexican album along with a photograph of John Kennedy. We received five tickets and invited Jesuit Father Lawrence O’Neill and two friends who were our house guests at the time. I borrowed a splendid long black mantilla with high comb to hold it. I, Norte-Americana though I was, wanted to celebrate the historic event in as Mexican a guise as possible. Our guests, Anna Dean, a friend from Boston and Helene Hagarty, papal volunteer, were equally resplendent. Father O’Neill and Charles saw us into the hired Cadillac complete with driver. We were ready to celebrate!

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We moved into the mainstream bumper to bumper while a steady procession of people on foot walked toward the Basilica. We parked blocks away, and the five of us joined them on foot. It was packed, the crowd estimated at 5,000, overflowing into the enormous atrium. (The new Basilica completed in 1976 replaced the dangerously sinking and leaning old one and is more spacious.) Men, women, children perched on surrounding walls and pillars – in trees, on roofs, everywhere – to get a good view of President Kennedy and Jackie [Jacqueline B. Kennedy Onassis].

Inside, the very air vibrated with anticipation. American Ambassador, Tony Freeman [Fulton Freeman], and other members of the diplomatic corps headed by Luigi Raimondi, the

Papal Delegate, were present as were the wives of several high Mexican officials, though their husbands stayed away as the law required.

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We had an excellent view of the side door where President Kennedy and his wife entered with their entourage, which included Senator and Mrs. Mike Mansfield [Maureen Mansfield] and Letitia Baldrige, social secretary to Mrs. Kennedy. They were met by Archbishop Primate of Mexico, Miguel Dario Miranda, Monsignor Gregorio Aguilar, Archpriest of the Basilica and Bishop Alonzo Escalante, M.M., Superior of the Guadalupan Missionaries.

Steady, measured applause followed them as they moved down the broad aisle to the first pew and took their places. The Mass began. The organ and choir burst with thrilling and glorious sounds. The tenor performed like a superstar. No music? No celebration? Low key? For Mexicans, the fiesta doesn't begin until the music starts. The Mass continued, sustained by splendid music throughout. Both the Mexican and American flags were displayed on the altar. The Mexican national colors, red,

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white and green, were softly draped on the frame of the famous image of Our Lady whose colors glowed freshly and clear, just as she appeared on this tilma of the humble peasant Juan Diego in 1531. All the flags of the American countries were fixed to the central lofty pillars, testifying to Our Lady's title: Empress of the Americas.

The archbishop spoke in his excellent English, welcoming the illustrious guests and all those present, praising the good relationship between the United States and Mexico, focusing on the need for peace and progress in Mexico and the world. He called upon all of us to pray for continued good will between our countries and all nations.

After the Mass, Archbishop Miranda and Monsignor Aguilar descended to the Kennedy pew. Mrs. Kennedy presented them with a bouquet of red roses, which was placed before the tabernacle on

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the main altar. Some were returned to her as a souvenir. She then was presented with a medal and an exquisite picture of Our Lady done in the finest of needle work by nuns of the City of Queretero. They had taken seven months to complete it.

As the presidential party moved back down the aisle, the organ and choir began the recessional, the stirring, triumphant national anthem.

“Ciña Oh patria! tus sienes de oliva  
De la paz el arcangel divino  
Que en el cielo tu eterno destino  
Por el dedo de Dios se escribió.”

“May the angel divine, O dear homeland

Crown thy brow with the olive branch of peace  
For thy destiny traced by God's own hand  
In the heavens shall ever increase."

Grinning his impish smile, John Kennedy looked up into the choir loft, raised his right hand in an O.K. victory salute to the musicians.  
Outside, celebration reigned:

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"VIVA MEXICO!"  
"VIVA GUADALUPE!"  
"VIVA KENNEDY!"

Everyone hugged and kissed. One hearty embrace almost cost me my beautiful borrowed mantilla and comb. No celebration? No music? The transforming presence of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the hearts of her faithful followers would not be denied. The Kennedys could not have received a more sincere and overwhelming ovation anywhere, even in Boston. The whole event became a healing experience and a creative encounter between two peoples.

It was truly the climax of their visit to Mexico and the most important thing they did while there.

Strangely, this story, to my knowledge, has never been fully told in the United States secular press. Theodore Sorensen's very detailed biography of Kennedy doesn't even mention the visit to Mexico. Letitia Baldrige, in her charming Of Diamonds and

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Diplomats, gives it only a few lively lines. In a review of major magazines and newspapers in the United States, no mention at all is made of the Guadalupe visit. But newspapers and magazines throughout Mexico taxed the journalistic supply of superlatives with their analyses, which echoed for weeks. It must be said that, hampered and fettered though the Church has been in Mexico in the past, ways have been found to allow it to exercise its function: schools, orphanages, hospitals, mission projects, churches. Catholic schools have managed to teach the Faith under the not too watchful eyes of lenient and liberal inspectors. Lately, government officials have been seen attending Mass in public. History was made recently when Mexico officially recognized the Vatican.

The president's 1962 visit to Guadalupe was, after all, one of the great public 'religious events' of our time, perhaps

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rivaling even Pope John Paul II's visit in 1990. One can prophesy that this historic day of July 2, 1962, will never be forgotten in Mexico, when a President of the United States and his



beautiful wife joined with the Mexican people in paying homage to “La Guadalupana,” where all Mexicans meet.

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