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Thousands flock to cathedral to venerate relics of Christ's passion

Devout make pilgrimage to pray before sacred items on tour this Lent

By Roxanne King



Over the weekend, midway through Lent and just a week before the release of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, several thousand faithful flocked to the cathedral to venerate items associated with Christ's last hours.

Some waited up to an hour to view the Relics of the Passion exhibit on display in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception March 5 and 6. The exhibit began its 2005 tour to six cities last month in Honolulu. The tour will end Holy Week in Los Angeles. The exhibit visited two cities last year.

Sponsored by the Apostolate for Holy Relics, the exhibit included a piece of the True Cross discovered by St. Helena; full size replicas of the nails used in Jesus' crucifixion made with shavings from the

actual nails; the Sindonis or cloth associated with the burial cloth of Jesus; and remains from the crown of thorns worn by Jesus. Additional relics were an artist's rendition of Veronica's Veil that had been touched to the true veil; a piece of the column of flagellation used in Jesus' scourging; a relic of the table of the Last Supper; and a bone fragment of St. Longinus, the centurion who pierced Christ's side and proclaimed, "Indeed this was the Son of God."

The display drew Catholics, non-Catholics and people from both inside and outside the Denver Archdiocese.

At 6 a.m. (Saturday) there was a family from Cheyenne, Wyoming, who started out at 4:30 a.m., said Tom Serafin, president of the Apostolate for Holy Relics, a nonprofit organization under the Archdiocese of Los Angeles dedicated to the guardianship and promotion of relics.

The reaction among those venerating the items was a mixture of curiosity, excitement, reverence and awe.

Today is my birthday, I had to come, said Greek Orthodox Father Ambrose Mayas, who was among those who had trekked to the cathedral at noon on Saturday.

Clad in the tall black headdress and robes of his order, the priest bowed and blessed himself several times before the relics displayed on a purple-covered table under the watchful eyes of caped Knights of Columbus.

Noting that the veneration of relics is an ancient tradition shared by the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches, he said, They are heavenly images that bring us closer to God.

The display reminded him of last year's blockbuster movie The Passion of the Christ, a recut version of which will open in Denver on March 11. The display, like the film, brought to life the Gospel events of our redemption, he said.

Deeply touched by the close relationship the film depicted between Jesus and his mother, the 58-year-old priest said he was also struck by the manner in which Christ accepted his cross.

In love and compassion he embraced the cross for all of us to set us free, Father Mayas said, thrilled that the display included a fragment of the True Cross.

Excited, too, by the relic of St. Longinus, he added, St. Longinus is a revered saint in the Orthodox Church. He was converted and it's important we know about him.

In addition to being a special treat for himself, like so many of the others who made a pilgrimage to visit the relics, Father Mayas said the trip was also a preparation to celebrate the joy of Easter.

Jim Lucero, 54, who converted to Catholicism from Anglicanism nine years ago, said the relics are tangible reminders of Christ's passion, death and resurrection.

I love the Church because it has so much history and the relics are part of that history, he said. By faith I do believe those relics are part of our Lord's history. It's incredible we have that physical matter we can identify with our Lord.

Although skeptics say that if all the relics of the True Cross were put together there would be enough wood for two or three crosses, an Apostolate for Holy Relics brochure notes that in 1870 Frenchman Rohault de Fleury catalogued all the relics of the True Cross, including those that were said to have existed but were lost. Measuring the existing ones and estimating the volume of the others, de Fleury added the figures and discovered that the fragments, if glued together, would not have made up more than one-third of a cross.

The relics on display were all authenticated in Rome, Serafin said. But he emphasized that their veneration is not a question of proof, but an act of faith even if the person is driven by curiosity.

The intention is still pure, he said. The action of the people that venerate them validates the relics themselves, whether an act of thanksgiving, hope, reparation or an act of love for Christ's crucifixion.

Many of those praying before the sacred items took rosaries, religious medals or scapulars to be touched to the relic of the True Cross. Serafin said he was particularly moved by those who asked him to touch their wedding rings to the relic, calling his ability to do so for them a privilege.

Puzzled by the significance of relics, Eva Rowinska, 30, a transplant to Denver from Poland, was drawn to visit the display to learn more about them.

I don't know, really, about relics and why we should honor them, because Jesus is right here, in Communion, she said. It's of course nice to touch a relic of the first degree—a piece of the True Cross Jesus died on.

Standing before the relic, Rowinska found herself saying a prayer to be recited before a crucifix.

It was grace for me, she said.
