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Local News

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Relic of St. Juan Diego to visit Denver

Piece of miraculous tilma to be displayed at cathedral for public veneration

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Some 20 million pilgrims a year trek to Mexico City to visit the awe-inspiring cloth enshrined there bearing the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. And now, a piece of the cloth is coming to Denver.

The Tilma of Tepeyac Tour will make available a relic of St. Juan Diego's tilma (cloak) to more than a dozen dioceses around the country over the next several months for public veneration. The tour will begin in Denver May 30-June 1 and will end in New York in December.

Sponsored by the Apostolate for Holy Relics, which is dedicated to increasing appreciation and understanding of relics and the saints associated with them, the tour aims to promote devotion to Mary during this Year of the Rosary proclaimed by Pope John Paul II, said AHR Vice President Andrew Walther.

"We hope that this pilgrimage will give those people who cannot go on pilgrimage to Mexico City an opportunity to share in the graces and blessings bestowed by Our Lady of Guadalupe," Walther said. "We also hope that people will take the faith and devotion of St. Juan Diego as a model for their own lives."

There is no cost to visit the relic, which will be on display at Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, located at Colfax Avenue and Logan Street.

"It's very exciting," said Mar Muñoz-Visoso, head of the Archdiocese of Denver's Hispanic Ministry Office. "We're going to be blessed with having a piece of the actual clothing Juan Diego was wearing when our Blessed Mother appeared to him."

Particularly exciting, she said, is that the tour visit takes place shortly before the opening of the new Hispanic center, Centro San Juan Diego, which bears the saint's name. The center will train faith formation leaders to serve the burgeoning Hispanic population and will provide education and outreach to needy Hispanics.

"Especially since the center is named after him, it's, in a sense, like he's paying a visit to us right at the time we are opening his home in Northern Colorado," Muñoz-Visoso said. Centro San Juan Diego is expected to open mid-summer.

In 1531 Mary appeared four times to Juan Diego, a poor Indian, on Tepeyac Hill outside modern-day Mexico City and instructed him to tell the bishop she wanted a church built at the site. The bishop complied with the request after being convinced of the genuineness of the apparition by the evidence of a life-size image of Mary, which miraculously appeared on Diego's outer garment.

In 1754 Benedict XIV declared Dec. 12 as the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. She was later designated patroness of the Americas. Last July, Pope John Paul II canonized Juan Diego in Mexico City. His feast day is Dec. 9.

The Guadalupe image, which continues to baffle scientists, is now the most recognizable religious symbol in Latin America and devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe is a favorite of Catholics throughout the Americas. The Guadalupe icon has been adopted by numerous causes, including the pro-life movement, which entrusts the unborn to the pregnant Madonna's protection.

Mexico City's Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, where Diego's tilma is enshrined, is the most visited Marian shrine in the world, according to AHR.

Unique to Mary's appearance in Mexico is that she left something behind — her image on the tilma. What makes the tilma even more extraordinary, said Tom Serafin, AHR president, is that "it was handled by the Blessed Mother."

Relics are personal remains and effects of saints. The relic coming to Denver consists of a tiny rectangular piece of Diego's tilma. It is encased in a reliquary attached to a silver chain, which is draped over a 17th century statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The cloth is surrounded by relics of other saints, including St. Francis Xavier and St. Teresa of Avila.

"You don't have to believe in relics or in miracles or apparitions, but the Church approves of these, which have been authenticated, as helps to our faith," Muñoz-Visoso said.

Since the earliest days of the Church, relics have been popular devotionals. Their popularity may have reached its zenith during the Middle Ages. In medieval times, according to AHR, veneration of relics played a prominent role in the daily life of European Christians: oaths were sworn and vows were made in the presence of relics, which served as heavenly witnesses. Relics were carried into battle, in the hope of securing divine aid and protection, and people afflicted with disease or with physical or mental infirmities were blessed with relics. Even today people make pilgrimages to sites where important relics are preserved.

The relic of St. Juan Diego going on tour is likely the only one in the United States, according to Msgr. Francis J. Weber the archivist for the Los Angeles Archdiocese who documented the relic's history for The Tidings newspaper in 1984. According to Msgr. Weber, it was given to Los Angeles Archbishop John Cantwell in 1941 by Archbishop Luis Maria Martinez of Mexico City. For years it was housed in the archives museum of the Los Angeles Archdiocese. Currently on loan for the tour, it is to be returned to Los Angeles in time to celebrate the feast days of Diego and Our Lady of Guadalupe. It is scheduled to be venerated in Los Angeles' new cathedral, Our Lady of the Angels, from Dec. 9-12, where it may eventually be enshrined, according to AHR officials.

The Tilma of Tepeyac tour in Denver will begin with a pilgrimage 5:30 p.m. May 30 from Centro San Juan Diego, located at 28th and Lawrence streets, to the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, where a bilingual Mass will be celebrated at 7 p.m. by Bishop José Gomez, S.T.D.

The pilgrimage will offer the future works of Centro San Juan Diego for the greater benefit of the archdiocesan Church, Muñoz-Visoso said.

"We are going to bring all of our hopes, all the future works of Centro San Juan Diego, to the cathedral and offer them there for the Church in Northern Colorado," she said.

On May 31, from 8 a.m.-11:30 a.m. and continuing after the noon Mass till 4 p.m., a "marathon of rosaries" will be offered at the cathedral for vocations to the priesthood. The rosaries will be scheduled every half-hour. Marian, pro-life, parish groups and Catholic organizations are invited to participate. (Contact Muñoz-Visoso at 303-715-3235 to schedule a time.)

The relic will remain on display at the cathedral all day June 1. The tour closes with Mass celebrated by Archbishop Charles Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., at 6:30 p.m. followed by the singing of the "Salve Regina."

"Both bishops are enthusiastically supporting this visit and everyone is invited to participate," Muñoz-Visoso said. "It's not an event just for Hispanics: Our Lady of Guadalupe is the Queen of the Americas. Everyone is invited."

For more information on relics, visit the Apostolate of Holy Relics Web site at www.relictour.org.

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