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Crucifixion relics heading this way

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Wood said to be from the cross (yes, The Cross), bits of nails from the Crucifixion and splinters from the table where Jesus and the apostles broke bread are heading to Tucson next month to be venerated by Catholics in Arizona and Mexico, church leaders announced yesterday.

The "Relics of the Passion Tour" is coming here just in time for Lent, and will be at various Catholic churches in Tucson, Nogales and Green Valley on Feb. 12 and 13.

These relics are now kept by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, under the authority of the Apostolate for Holy Relics.

The Arizona Knights of Columbus is sponsoring the relics tour in southern Arizona for the benefit of the region's 300,000 Roman Catholics.

The Knights of Columbus is a Catholic philanthropy fraternity with more than 12,000 members in Arizona.

"This is something that's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to touch Christ," said John Garcia of the Arizona Knights of Columbus. "This isn't just the Bible anymore. This is the real thing. This is taking my faith to the physical level."

The relics come three days after Ash Wednesday - good timing for Tucson Catholic Delores Taleck.

"It would be an excellent way to start out Lent," she said.

More important, she said, it's a real-life manifestation of "the passion," which Catholics believe to be Christ's suffering for humanity and a term back in the modern lexicon after Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ."

"It means that he suffered all this for me personally," Taleck said.

Pedro Nájera, head of the Knights of Columbus' Arizona operation, said the relics will be good for morale in the Tucson diocese, which has filed for bankruptcy protection in the wake of multiple claims of sexual abuse by clergy.

"It reinforces the faith," Nájera said. "Most of our parishioners are not dissuaded by the bankruptcy and sex scandal. They still go to church and still believe."

Here's what's coming:

- A splinter from the cross on which Jesus was crucified.
- Pieces of the table from the Last Supper.
- Shavings of one of the nails used to crucify Jesus.
- Small pieces of the "crown of thorns" placed on Christ's head before he was crucified.

At this point, skeptics might want to know whether these relics are the genuine articles.

According to the Apostolate for Holy Relics, they are.

"It's like asking if King Tut's tomb really belonged to King Tut," said Andrew Walthor, vice president of the apostolate.

They are part of a collection gathered by St. Helen, during a trip to the biblical lands in the fourth century, he said.

The relics were known by early Jerusalem Christians to be authentic and since St. Helen brought them back to Rome, the Vatican had kept close tabs on them, he said.

But even if they aren't authentic, he said, Catholics can still take comfort. "These are the same artifacts that have been venerated by Christians for 1,700 years," he said.

This brings up a second sticky point.

Many Protestant religions consider the practice of sanctifying artifacts as close to violating the commandment barring the worship of false idols.

But Catholics say they don't worship holy relics, they venerate them as conduits to faith rather than as godly showpieces.

Some Catholics don't see the need to make a special trip to see these artifacts.

"I'm not a big relic guy," said Dr. Albert Callie after Mass last night at the Benedictine Monastery at 800 N. Country Club Road. "More important than seeing relics is receiving the spirit."

But if they "bring deeper meaning" to others, then that's a good thing, Callie said.

Veronica Lozano-Myers, a 45-year-old widow on what she calls a spiritual journey for answers, felt differently.

"How many people get the opportunity to see part of the cross firsthand?" she asked.

## **RELICS OF THE PASSION:**

Tour dates for southern Arizona:

### **Saturday, Feb. 12**

- 9 a.m.: Sacred Heart, 272 N. Rodriguez St., Nogales. Mass followed by veneration until 1 p.m.
- 2 p.m.: Our Lady of the Valley, 505 N. La Canada Drive, Green Valley. Veneration only, till 4 p.m.
- 5:30 p.m.: St. Augustine Cathedral, 192 S. Stone Ave. Mass with Bishop Gerald Kicanas; Veneration to follow.

### **Sunday, Feb. 13**

- 9 a.m.: St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, 8650 N. Shannon Road. Mass followed by veneration in side chapel till 5 p.m.
- 6 p.m.: Our Mother of Sorrows, 1800 S. Kolb Road. Mass; veneration to follow.

Source: Arizona Knights of Columbus

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