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Relics from Christ's last days coming

By Lawn Griffiths, Tribune
East Valley Tribune

USA - Sacred fragments of items Jesus is said to have touched in his last hours are coming to the Valley on Feb. 10-12 in a "Relics of the Passion Tour."

Long lines are expected at each Catholic church along the stops to see the 2,000-year-old items on display under glass.

"We'll probably have to have lines going on each side," said tour organizer Richard Jeffery of the Arizona Knights of Columbus, which is coordinating the event. "We would like to have families come and venerate this together."

Items will include a sliver of wood from the cross on Calvary, a piece of wood from the table of the Last Supper in the Upper Room, a fragment of a thorn from the "crown of thorns" put on Jesus' head as he hung on the cross, a nail containing steel shavings from an original nail that held Christ on the cross and a fragment of cloth, or sindonis, exterior wrapping of the famed Shroud of Turin in which Christ's body was wrapped.

The Knights of Columbus on Wednesday were trying to finalize a schedule of four Valley churches. Being sought for Feb. 10 were one in Chandler and another elsewhere in the East Valley, Jeffery said. The relics would go on display at St. John Vianney Catholic Church in Goodyear the morning of Feb. 11, then to Ss. Simon and Jude Cathedral in Phoenix where they could be on display from 5:30 p.m. Feb. 11 to 4 a.m. on Feb. 12. From there, the items will go to Nogales, Green Valley and Tucson for Feb. 12 and 13.

The items, originally from Catholic museums and shrines in Rome, will be on a six-state tour during the season of Lent, starting with Arizona. The items are made available through the Apostolate for Holy Relics, a Los Angelesbased nonprofit organization under the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

"All relics basically come from Rome," said Andrew Walther, vice president of the apostolate, which has its own collection of 1,200 sacred relics obtained, with documentation, through church sources, such as monasteries, convents and collectors.

Many of the physical items of Christ's last days were taken, in the 4th century, from Jerusalem to Rome by St. Helen, mother of the Roman emperor Constantine after her conversion to Christianity. The "true cross," as it has been called, is said to have been excavated in the 4th century from near the site of the crucifixion and taken to Rome.

To those who doubt the authenticity of the relics, Walther said, "People don't typically question Roman artifacts. There are not a lot of questions about things like that," he said. "By and large, these are relics that have been venerated since the 4th century, and prior to that, there is documentary evidence that they were venerated in Jerusalem."

A similar relics tour in St. Louis and Washington, D.C., last year drew tens of thousands, spurred by the film "The Passion of The Christ," Walther said. Denver, Detroit, Milwaukee, Baltimore and Honolulu also will get the display during Lent, which begins Feb. 9 and ends with Easter on March 27.

"No other city is going to have it as long as we are going to have it in Arizona," said John Garcia of the Arizona Knights.

In November 2003, the Knights sponsored another Arizona relics tour. On display at nine sites was a piece of the "tilma" or cloth from the coat of St. Juan Diego, the Mexican peasant farmer who said he saw the Blessed Virgin Mary, known as "Our Lady of Guadalupe" in a field in 1531. He would later see her image reappear on his cloak, or tilma.

An estimated 18,000 were able to see the tilma fragment during that brief tour stops in Arizona. "This will be much bigger than the tilma," Garcia predicted.

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