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Cloak and Awe

The Osgood File (CBS Radio): 7/22/03

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Miracle cloak piece on tour in the United States attracts and inspires Catholics.

From visions of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico to a white fence post in Australia that some say looks like the Virgin Mary, claims of physical manifestations of faith, like miracles and visions, surface monthly among Catholics. Physical manifestations of faith have a long history in Christianity, starting with Jesus' miracles, and remain a central part of Catholicism today.

This year, a tiny piece from a Mexican saint's cloak, which inexplicably bears the image of the Virgin Mary and is considered a miracle, will tour at least 10 Catholic dioceses in the U.S., drawing anticipated thousands of Catholics to venerate it. A miracle is defined as something that happens that has no natural explanation and for which only God is responsible. Now on display in Mexico City, the cloak draws about 20 million visitors a year, says Andrew Walther, vice president of the nonprofit Apostolate for Holy Relics in Los Angeles.

Walther says it is believed to be the only part of the cloak outside Mexico. Given to the Los Angeles Archdiocese in 1941, it was in a mission museum, virtually unknown to area Catholics, an estimated 80 percent of which are Latino. An archivist, on the board of the Apostolate for Holy Relics, recently discovered its existence. "It was amazing to know such a thing existed," Walther says. Walther describes the tiny square as tan brown and rough, like burlap. It is contained in a silver locket with a glass front that is hung around the neck of a wooden statue from the seventeenth century. "It belongs where people can see it," Walther says.

For Catholics who can't go to Mexico, Walther says being in the presence of the cloak square is a way to get close to the miracle of several centuries ago. The cloak is one of many Catholic physical manifestations of faith, ranging from people who bear the stigmata, or bleeding wounds on hands like those of Christ on the cross, to people who see visions of the Virgin Mary.

To understand Catholic conviction regarding physical manifestations of faith, Dr. Robert Bruce Mullin, history professor at General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church and an expert on religious imagination, explains that Catholicism has always been a physically oriented religion. In order to attain sainthood in the Catholic Church, the person must have performed at least two miracles. Catholic theology says that when the divine enters the secular world, the material is transformed and made holy, says Mullin. So for many Catholics, being in the presence of a physical manifestation of faith means being closer to God. "It makes God's reality immediate, present and real."

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However, Mullin says there are Catholics who regard those who venerate physical manifestations of faith as old-fashioned or superstitious. Yet he says interest in physical manifestations of faith has only increased in the twentieth century, keeping pace with scientific advancements. Mullins says as science has increasingly demystified the world, people continue to seek God's handprint in the world.

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