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Thousands venerate relic of St. Juan Diego as national tour begins



DENVER (CNS) -- They went bearing their sorrow, they went bearing thanks, they went seeking grace. They went on pilgrimage to see a bit of cloth snipped from a centuries-old garment that bears the miraculous image of the Blessed Mother.

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Six thousand people gathered to see a tiny rectangular piece of St. Juan Diego's tilma, or cloak, on display at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Denver May 30-June 1.

The Mile High City was the first stop for the Tilma of Tepeyac Tour. The relic will be available for public veneration in 20 cities over the next several months. The last stop will be New York, where it will be on display Dec. 5-7.

The first national tour of the relic was organized to promote Marian devotion during this Year of the Rosary and to honor St. Juan Diego, who was canonized last July.

The tilma itself is enshrined in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. The tiny piece cut from it was given as a gift from the archbishop of Mexico City to the archbishop of Los Angeles 61 years ago.

The half-inch square relic is on loan for the tour to the Apostolate for Holy Relics, an organization dedicated to encouraging veneration of relics and saints. It is encased in a reliquary on a silver chain, which is draped over a 17th-century statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Two hundred faithful of all ages walked in a procession as Deacon Al Sandoval carried the relic the mile and a half to the cathedral from the archdiocese's soon-to-be-opened Hispanic ministry center, Centro San Juan Diego, near lower downtown. Another 400 people joined them for a special evening Mass celebrated by Denver Auxiliary Bishop Jose Gomez.

"How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Bishop Gomez said during his homily, repeating Elizabeth's words to Mary in the Gospel reading.

The words resonated with the congregation.

"To me, the tilma is like having the Blessed Mother right there with you," said Paul Jacob, 63, of Tampa, Fla., during the procession. He said he learned of the relic's tour while visiting family in Denver.

"It's a blessing to me to be able to walk in this procession," he told the Denver Catholic Register, newspaper of the archdiocese.

"I feel God's grace now -- it's a blessing."

The prayerful procession past run-down tenements, bars and businesses slowed rush-hour traffic, stopped children's play and drew people out of their homes. It was an emotional event for participants, some of whom cried.

One woman sought healing as her 44-year marriage ends. A college student walked in thanksgiving for her recent conversion. A family walked to honor Mary.

"The Virgin has always been there for me," said a grateful Catherine Pacheco, 27, of St. Elizabeth Parish.

The tilma is seen by believers as tangible proof of Mary's appearance to a poor Indian on Tepeyac Hill in present-day Mexico City 472 years ago. It convinced a bishop to build a chapel that a poor Indian named Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin said Mary had requested when she appeared to him.

The bishop initially refused the Indian's request and asked for proof. Mary told Juan Diego the proof would be roses blooming in the December cold, which he was to gather into his tilma and take to the doubting bishop.

When the peasant opened the garment before the bishop, the roses fell out, revealing Mary's image imprinted on the cloth. Studies of it have stymied scientists who cannot say how it was made.

The miracle spurred one of the greatest mass conversions to Christianity in history: 8 million Aztecs were converted over a seven-year period. Annually millions from around the world visit the Mexican basilica where the full tilma is displayed.

In Denver, following the Mass that opened the tilma tour, people waited in line for up to an hour for the opportunity to reverently kiss the relic. Others knelt to pray near it.

"We believe in Our Lady of Guadalupe, that's our mother," said 16-year-old Adriana Rosales of St. Therese Parish in Aurora. "(The tilma) is the proof that Our Lady of Guadalupe exists."

Repeating words spoken by the pope at St. Juan Diego's canonization, Bishop Gomez told the cathedral congregation that "the 'Guadalupe event' ... meant the beginning of evangelization with a vitality that surpassed all expectations."

That spirit of evangelization, which began with St. Juan Diego's persistence, is behind the center named after him. Scheduled to open July 12, Centro San Juan Diego will provide training for lay church leaders and pastoral services to families.

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