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Saturday, October 25, 2003

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Sacred relic coming to Utah

1/2-inch piece of cloth ties Catholic teens to 16th-century Mexico

By **Diane Urbani**

Deseret Morning News

DRAPER — It's a tiny piece of cactus fiber. And as it is carried across the country, it will stitch together at least two disparate groups: Utah teenagers in 2003 and the Aztecs of 16th-century Mexico.

"The tilma that's traveling through here," as this half-inch-square of cloth is informally known, is a relic of St. Juan Diego. He may be just a name in much of the United States, but in Mexico he is the heroic peasant who saw a vision of Mary, the mother of God, in 1531. According to the story of Juan Diego's life, Mary's image appeared on his tilma, or cloak, and gave him the courage to stand up to the Spanish conquistadors who had overrun Mexico some years earlier. After the apparition, Mary became known as Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico.

A piece of that 472-year-old tilma is on its way to Juan Diego Catholic High School in Draper, the only U.S. institution named for the Mexican saint. It will arrive, framed in glass, first at the Cathedral of the Madeleine on Wednesday, Nov. 5, and next it will spend Nov. 6, 7 and 8 at the high school.

Students at Juan Diego look forward to the tilma events for various reasons. For one, classes are unlikely to be in regular session, as droves of family members and others from across the Salt Lake Valley will visit the school. Nearly 20 percent of Juan Diego's 660 students are Latino, and many of their families are well-acquainted with Our Lady of Guadalupe. So the school's principal, Galey Colosimo, anticipates an influx of Latin American culture in his hallways.

The campus is one of 19 U.S. sites where the tilma will be shown, Colosimo said. "It will be at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, at the new (Our Lady of the Angels) cathedral in Los Angeles, and then there's us, little Juan Diego High School in Utah."

Drew D'Ambrosio, 17, drives to Juan Diego every day from Salt Lake City. He's seen other relics at St. Peter's in the Vatican but isn't sure how he'll react when the tilma arrives in Draper.

"It's pretty surprising that it would come here," D'Ambrosio said. Does he expect to be moved by the sight? "I'm going to wait and see," he replies.



Stained-glass in the chapel at Juan Diego High School, shows Juan Diego in the presence of the Virgin Mary, who is said to have told him he would find Castilian roses blooming on a rocky hill.

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A statue of Juan Diego stands on the school grounds of Juan Diego High.

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It is just a piece of material, albeit one that draws an estimated 10 million pilgrims per year to its usual resting place in Mexico City. Centuries after Juan Diego's vision, Catholics continue to climb the steps — some on their knees — to the basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Why should a relic have such power? To Colosimo, the tilma fragment is a ticket to a compelling, and true, story.

Put yourself in Juan Diego's place and time, he began.

"You're walking to church one day, and you see the Virgin Mary appear to you. If you're Juan Diego, you may have thought there was something wrong with you," since there's a slim line between vision and hallucination. Then Mary told the Indian, in clear terms, that it was time for Mexico City's Catholic leaders to build a new church large enough for people from all quarters.

"He had to convince the bishop of Mexico City, a man who is not native, who was seen as an oppressor, that he had had this vision," Colosimo continued. "Juan Diego was a peasant; he didn't have much education. The bishop threw him out of his office three straight times."

Juan Diego gathered up his courage three straight times, returning to ask again for an audience. Finally, the bishop told him he had to produce proof that he had seen Mary.

"Now, I'm well-educated, but if I had to go to Bishop Niederauer (of the Diocese of Salt Lake City)" amid such circumstances, "I'm not sure if I'd have the perseverance and courage to keep going back," Colosimo said.

As it turned out, Our Lady reappeared to Juan Diego after his meetings with the bishop. She told him that Castilian roses were growing on top of a rocky hill known as Tepayac outside the city. Since the bishop was from Castile, Spain, he would be moved by the sight of such flowers. Climb Tepayac and gather them, Mary instructed.

It was the first week of December, not the season for roses, much less a variety not native to Mexico. Juan Diego had a hard time believing he would find what he needed on that hilltop.

But the Castilian roses were there, Colosimo said. The peasant filled his cloak with the deep red blooms and went back to the bishop.

Unfolding the cloth, he let the flowers fall to the floor.

The bishop looked up at Juan Diego's empty cloak and saw, resplendent in her own golden light, the image of Our Lady.

Not long after, construction of the basilica began. Since the 16th century, the shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe has become the most-visited pilgrimage site in the Western Hemisphere.

The image of Our Lady is a constant in Mexicans' daily life, said Juan Diego High School junior Alan Garcia. "She's in our homes and in our cars," reminding people they needn't be wealthy or powerful to be close to God. Garcia, 16, added, "As long as you're a spiritual person" you're worthy, as Juan Diego was.

Juan Diego was named a saint just last year when Pope John Paul II traveled to Mexico City to canonize him. So even if he lived almost five centuries ago, he may seem more relevant to these high school students than, say, St. Thomas Aquinas.



Students Drew D'Ambrosio, 17, Marcus Eldridge, 17, and Rosa Stahla, 17, chat in the hall at Juan Diego High School in Draper.

Michael Brandy, Deseret Morning News

Yet Colosimo wants to make even the physically distant saints relevant to young people.

"We need them more than we ever have. Saints are people who lived contrary lives; they don't march to the tune of society. That contrary point of view makes for a remarkable life," he said. "Ultimately, that's what God is calling us to do."



Statues of Juan Diego and the Blessed Virgin stand outside Juan Diego High. The artist was Michael Dente.

Michael Brandy, Deseret Morning News

Juan Diego Catholic High School students are a lot like other Utah teens, whipping out cell phones as soon as they exit the building, playing loud hip-hop from their car stereos while cruising out of the parking lot. Ask them whether saints have anything to do with their everyday travels, and they might surprise you.

"My patron saint is St. Anthony," said D'Ambrosio, the Salt Lake senior. He misplaces things, and often turns to Anthony, known as the patron saint of lost causes. One weekend in mid-October, D'Ambrosio lost his wallet. With no idea where it could have gone, he said prayers Saturday, followed them with more on Sunday, and went to school empty-pocketed on Monday.

"Someone found my wallet in the parking lot," he said. "I was stoked."

St. Cecelia, the patron saint of music, inspires Rosa Stahla, another Juan Diego senior. "I saw her relics in Rome, and they moved me so much." A pianist and singer, Stahla considers Cecelia a kind of role model. Standing close to pieces of the saint's harp was an

experience like no other, she said.

Members of the public, Catholic or not, are invited to venerate Juan Diego's tilma between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. Nov. 7, and between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Nov. 8. To venerate means to "pause and contemplate prayerfully," Colosimo explained. "It does not mean to worship," since relics are only a symbol of God's presence, not God themselves.

In learning and thinking about Juan Diego's life, people have an opportunity to explore some spiritual questions, he added. Those might include "How does the relic move me in my faith life? When I pause and consider Juan Diego's journey, what value does it have in my life today?"

Relics and other symbols of faith link people across the borders of time and space, added Monsignor Terrence Fitzgerald, vicar general of the Salt Lake Catholic Diocese. People make pilgrimages to churches containing relics, he said, for much the same reason they keep pictures of their late grandparents on their desks. "These images are reminders, keeping us connected."

As people research their family trees, some also find themselves interested in the lives of the saints, he said. "They are our ancestors in faith."

Catholics believe in the "Communion of saints," an all-embracing family of hope. "So even though I'm in Salt Lake City, Utah, I'm connected to Assisi," where St. Francis walked, "and to the Guadalupe" of St. Juan Diego.

Colosimo emphasized that one need not be Catholic or of any particular ethnicity to visit the school and find out about the tilma. In fact, 23 percent of Juan Diego High's students aren't Catholic. Marcus Eldridge, 17, is part of that minority. While the tilma's arrival "is not a huge spiritual thing" to him, he's looking forward to the commotion. "I think it's a good event," he said, "because it brings people together."



Principal Gale Colosimo says he anticipates an influx of Hispanics at Juan Diego, where 23 percent are non-Catholic.

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