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Friday, October 10

Our Lady of Guadalupe relic at cathedral

By Sarah Eisenhauer, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Friday, October 10, 2003

PALM BEACH GARDENS -- Thousands of Catholics from across the state are expected to make a pilgrimage to the Cathedral of St. Ignatius Loyola this weekend to see a tiny piece of cloth from the nearly 500-year-old cloak the faithful believe bears the miraculous image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

That image of the Virgin Mary is one of the most recognizable religious symbol in Latin America.

Palm Beach Gardens is the only stop in the southeast United States on the 20-city "Tilma of Tepeyac Tour," which began in May and will end in December. At the most recent four-day stop in San Antonio and Dallas, the tiny piece of the tilma, or cloak, drew more than 40,000 people. A procession stretched several city blocks.

"People have a true sense of pilgrimage about this," said the Rev. John Kasperek, St. Ignatius pastor. "It brings people out on a journey of prayer."

The tilma's story dates to 1531, when a peasant named Juan Diego wore the cloak on a December morning as he walked to Mass near what is now Mexico City.

According to the popular story, the Virgin Mary appeared to Juan Diego atop Tepeyac Hill three times and told him she wanted a church built in her honor at the base of the hill.

Diego visited the bishop of Mexico City twice before the bishop requested proof of Mary's visits. She appeared to the peasant again and told him to pick the roses on the hill, which were blooming despite the cold weather. She arranged the roses in his cloak and told him to take it to the bishop.

Many Catholics believe when Juan Diego opened his cloak, a colorful image of the Virgin Mary was imprinted on the cloak. The Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe was built on Tepeyac Hill, where the full tilma remains as an object of veneration. Juan Diego was canonized last year.



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The piece of tilma now on tour was snipped off in 1941 and sent to the archbishop of Los Angeles. Today through Sunday, the half-inch-square cloth will be available for viewing at the cathedral's social center in a Plexiglas case about the size of a matchbox. It's suspended from the neck of a 26-inch, 17th-century statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

"It's a real link to a very special part of our history," said Andrew Walther, vice president of the Apostolate for Holy Relics in Los Angeles, which organized the tour. "Everywhere we've taken it, literally thousands of people have showed up."

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The organizers choose the Diocese of Palm Beach as a stop after receiving an invitation from former Bishop Sean O'Malley, he said.

Kasperek said several parishes throughout the diocese and state, including some from Miami and Sebastian, are planning bus trips to view the relic.

"It's a big deal in the sense that most people aren't able to travel to Mexico City to view the entire tilma," he said. "But this is a way for them to experience it."

West Palm Beach resident Lisa Pinto said she'll enthusiastically be among the many Catholics at this weekend's events. The chance to view the relic is a "very big deal," she said, and particularly close to the hearts of the Spanish-speaking population.

Many Catholics have personal reasons for devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Pinto said her connection was strengthened when she worked for an adoption agency that found homes for children in Mexican orphanages.

"As part of the work, we visited the shine in Mexico City, and it's so moving to see the devotion the people in Mexico have to it," said Pinto, a human resources manager for *The Palm Beach Post*. "The image is so bright when you see it. Photographs and prints just don't do justice to it."

Officials at the Apostolate for Holy Relics say the tilma's existence still puzzles scientists. The cloth, made from local plant fiber, should have disintegrated within years, they contend.

"I believe it's truly a miraculous image," Pinto said. "There's nothing else like it in the world."

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