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Category: Religion

Faithful flock to see relic from Mexico

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It was an event that changed a hemisphere.

When the Virgin Mary appeared four times to an Indian peasant named Juan Diego in 1531, according to Catholic tradition, she imprinted a vivid image of herself on the front of his *tilma*, or cloak, as a sign that the appearance was real.

Now a tiny piece of that tilma is in San Antonio, a 500-year-old relic that moves some to tears, strengthens faith and gives petitioners hope for miracles.

Juan Diego's encounter prompted a surge of Catholic evangelization in the Americas, with millions converting to Catholicism, and led to his canonization last year by Pope John Paul II in Mexico City.

Thousands lined up to see the relic Friday at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Little Flower, where it will stay through Sunday morning.

"This particular relic, to me, is superspecial," said Father John Suenram, the basilica's pastor. "It gives us an immediate association with a transforming historical event that happened in 1531."

The half-inch-square of cloth is enclosed in a Plexiglas case little bigger than a matchbox. It's suspended by a silver chain from the neck of a 26-inch statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

It's positioned on a stand before the altar and flanked by a 4th Degree Knights of Columbus honor guard.

Pilgrims march up the center aisle in single file and pause briefly before it to pray. Then they move to pews to pray silently or join in reciting the rosary. Some leave.

The relic arrived at the basilica after a 7 a.m. Mass at the Carmelite Monastery attended by 80 people.

Auxiliary Bishop Patrick Zurek celebrated another Mass in the basilica before 500 people, including 270 students of Little Flower School.



The relic is hung from a silver chain around the Virgin Mary..
Kin Man Hui/Express-News

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More Masses and rosaries continued throughout Friday and will continue today.

More than 4,000 visited the relic Friday, but attendance is expected to be much heavier today. Shrine officials had predicted at least 30,000 would see it by the time it leaves Sunday morning.

"It's very special — part of the miracle that happened at Tepeyac," said Eusebia Borrego, a basilica parishioner who visited the relic with her husband.

The tilma itself is on permanent display in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Former Mexico City Archbishop Luis Maria Martinez y Rodriguez cut a tiny square from the original cloth more than 60 years ago and gave it to Los Angeles Archbishop John J. Cantwell.

The relic was kept in Los Angeles church archives until this year and is to be permanently enshrined in the new Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels after the present 20-city tour.

"Even though it's very small, it's part of the original tilma," Borrego said. "It comes from a very special place and a very special person."

No natural explanation has been given for its remaining intact for 472 years.

Dianna and Bob Stensrud of Universal City said the relic confirmed their belief in the power of prayer. They've been praying for Dianna Stensrud's mother, who is diabetic.

"I pray a lot in the church, and I have great faith in the Lord Jesus and the Virgin Mary," Stensrud said. "My mother is already getting better because of prayer. I saw the story about the relic coming and said, 'We have to go. This is a sign.'"

Gilbert Peña, a basilica parishioner, said he'd like to see everyone in San Antonio visit the relic.

"No matter how small it is, to us it's a great blessing. I came to feel closer to Jesus and to the Virgin Mary," he said.

Relics either are saints' body parts or objects that saints touched while they were living. They aren't needed for prayer, Suenram said.

"But they're powerful physical evidence of ordinary people who attained holiness through perseverance. Thus, they can encourage others to persevere on their path to holiness."

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