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Top Stories

SACRED SIGHT

18-city tour of the Tilma of Tepeyac holy relic stops in Elm City Friday

Sandi Kahn Shelton , Register Staff

06/05/2003

NEW HAVEN — A small piece of cloth, cut from a world-famous cloak, will be on display at the Knights of Columbus Museum this week, giving faithful Catholics throughout New England a chance to view part of the most revered holy relic in the Western hemisphere.

Larry Sowinski, museum director, says that the world-famous Tilma of Tepeyac relic is the only piece ever removed from the tilma (or cloak) that carries the image of the Virgin Mary or Our Lady of Guadalupe, patron saint of the Americas.



The Tilma of Tepeyac relic is a piece of the tilma (cloak) on which the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe (Virgin Mary) appears. Photo courtesy of the Knights of Columbus

"This is a wonderful opportunity for Catholics to see this," Sowinski says. "The properties of this cloth are quite remarkable."

The tilma itself, which remains in Mexico City, was mysteriously imprinted with an almost photographic-quality image of the Virgin Mary in 1531.

Scientists have been unable to explain how the image got there or what has kept the poor-quality tilma from disintegrating, as it should have. But 472 years later, it's still intact, despite being touched by millions of visitors over the years.

These days, Sowinski says, visitors aren't allowed to touch the cloth anymore, but more than 10 million people journey to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City annually to see the sacred image.

The story of the apparition is a famous one in Catholic history. In 1520, Emperor Montezuma surrendered his huge Aztec Empire, including Mexico, to Cortes and his small Spanish force. A number of Mexicans converted to Catholicism, believing a prophecy that said Cortes would bring the True Religion to their area.

One of them took the name Juan Diego.

While en route to Mass in December 1531, Juan Diego, 55, passed Tepayac Hill, where he saw a beautiful young woman on top of the hill. He recognized her as the Blessed Mother, and she directed him to go to the bishop of Mexico City and tell him to build a church at Tepeyac.

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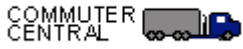
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The bishop, doubting Juan Diego's credibility, asked for a sign. The Virgin Mother then provided Juan Diego with proof when he returned to Tepeyac. In his tilma, she placed roses that were growing on the hill, even though it was winter.



When Juan Diego showed his rose-filled tilma to the bishop, the bishop and his entourage fell to their knees in adoration. But it wasn't the roses that struck them; instead, it was the magnificently colored image of the Blessed Mother, which was imprinted on the tilma. Juan Diego was amazed to see this as well.



In honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the church was built and the tilma placed there. Juan Diego was made the caretaker and spoke about his vision to the many pilgrims who visited there. More than 8 million native Mexicans converted to Christianity in seven years.

Five-hundred years later, following his election to the papacy in 1978, Pope John Paul II selected Mexico as his first international pilgrimage and went to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. He prayed before the venerable image on the tilma.

In 1941, the small relic of the tilma that is now on tour was given to the Diocese of Los Angeles by the Archbishop of Mexico City. Last year, more than 5 million people attended the canonization of Juan Diego, and to commemorate the first year of his sainthood, the diocese of Los Angeles agreed to send the relic to be viewed at various dioceses across the United States.

The relic is a small rectangular piece of cloth, similar to burlap in appearance, Sowinski says, and it is encased inside a see-through locket. "It's truly marvelous to see," he says. "Our Lady of Guadalupe is the most significant patron saint of the Americas, and so many miracles are attributed to her. There's quite a large following of devotion."

The relic is only being shown in 18 cities nationwide. In New England, it is only being shown at the Knights of Columbus Museum.

Sowinski says he has no idea how many people will be coming to view the relic, although he says the museum is getting between 25-35 calls per day from all over New England requesting information.

"We've never gotten this many calls before, even on our biggest exhibits," he says. "Seeing this is going to be a very rewarding experience for those who understand the importance of the relic."

- To learn more about holy relics, go to www.apostolateforholylrelics.com


IF YOU GO

- What: The Tilma of Tepeyac exhibition
- Where: Knights of Columbus Museum, 1 State St., New Haven
- When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily, Friday-June 15
- Tickets: Free
- Info: (203) 865-0400

Contact Sandi Kahn Shelton at (203) 789-5666 or sandish@mindspring.com.

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