

At St. Patrick's, a Fragment of an Aztec Saint's Cloak
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By DANIEL J. WAKIN

Two women in the pews of St. Patrick's Cathedral wept quietly. Several more knelt at the brass altar rail, their heads bowed before the half-inch-square bit of cloth. A volunteer handed out petals from the sprays of red roses behind her.

In the culminating stop of a 20-city tour, a piece of the venerated cloak, or tilma, of St. Juan Diego arrived at the cathedral yesterday and took its place on a side altar beneath a portrait of the Virgin Mary known as Our Lady of Guadalupe.

It was a rare event for St. Patrick's, the first display of a relic since 1999, when the bones of St. Therese of Lisieux were viewed by 15,000 people. "We receive now a relic of the tilma for us to venerate," Cardinal Edward M. Egan said in a welcoming ceremony before about 100 people. "Today New York is honored."

Clasping the metal reliquary in two hands, he carried it to a side altar, knelt and prayed. An attendant removed the cloth, contained in a small metal frame, from the reliquary and hung it on a statue of the Virgin. He lowered a clear plastic protective box over the statue. Two Knights of Columbus in cloaks and feathered hats stood guard.

"You got to keep the crowd moving," a security guard said into his two-way radio.

There was not much of crowd yet, actually, but thousands of people are expected over the weekend to honor and pray before a relic tied to Our Lady of Guadalupe, a beloved and venerated symbol for Hispanic Catholics, a source of Mexican national identity and an increasing subject of devotion for non-Hispanics.

The relic was cut from what believers say was the cloak of Juan Diego, an Aztec Indian convert to Catholicism who had a vision of the Virgin in 1531. Her image was said to have miraculously appeared on the cloak, which is now the object of passionate worship at the basilica in Mexico City.

Mexico City's archbishop gave the patch to the archbishop of Los Angeles in 1941, and in recent years it has been held, with little notice, in the archives of the Los Angeles archdiocese. It is now destined for a more prominent place in Los Angeles's new cathedral.

Several Roman Catholic scholars have questioned whether Juan Diego ever existed, while in Mexico, critics have seen Juan Diego as another symbol, one of foreign subjugation of native peoples. But Pope John Paul II declared Our Lady of Guadalupe the patron saint of the Americas in 1999 and canonized Juan Diego last year.

A nonprofit group dedicated to the veneration of saints, the Apostolate for Holy Relics, organized the tour with contributions from local dioceses and the Knights of Columbus.

The tour shows the growing influence of Latinos on the American Church. But Our Lady of Guadalupe has also attracted a growing non-Latino following, church officials say. The crowds have been mainly non-Hispanic, said Andrew Walther, the vice president of the Apostolate for Holy Relics, who has carried the relic in a briefcase for much of the tour. He said about 125,000 people have viewed the relic on the tour so far.

One person who viewed the relic at St. Patrick's was Anne Manice, director of a women's health clinic in Manhattan that discourages abortion. "She's probably the strongest presence of God on this continent," Ms. Manice said of Our Lady. "America is a new country, and it's still poor in apparitions of the presence of God." She said the Guadalupe Virgin is depicted as pregnant, leading to special significance for abortion opponents.

The Rev. Kevin J. Nelan, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church on West 14th Street, suggested it was the increasing presence of Mexicans in congregations that were influencing others.

Cardinal Egan, addressing reporters, repeated what believers often say about the cloak: scientists cannot explain what made the image or why the cloth has not deteriorated. In an interview, one skeptic, the Rev. Stafford Poole, a historian who wrote a book about Our Lady of Guadalupe, said that in fact no reputable scientists had examined the cloak, that photographs in 1982 showed the image had been painted in several styles and that the material had indeed deteriorated.

It was no surprise that such a view held little weight yesterday. Our Lady of Guadalupe was like a mother, said Dinse Baz, 34, a graphic designer who visited the relic while on vacation here. "Imagine what you feel about your mom. It's a thousand times more," she said. "It's like something magical. Every time you ask for something from her, it becomes true."