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Quick Search

Utah Politics
Online Poll
2002 Olympics

Columnists
- Rolly & Wells
- Mullen
- Reader Advocate
- Wharton

Front Page
Contents
Past Editions
Search

Archives
Weather
Columnists
Obituaries
Today's Page 1
Help Desk

Classifieds
Cars/RVs
Real Estate
Jobs

Education Guide
Utah Bride Guide
Utah City Guide
Shopping Guide
Grocery Guru
Fantasy Sports
TV Week

Advertising Info
Bus./Industry
Nation/World
Utah

Business
Sports
Editorials
- Commentary
- Public Forum

Lifestyle
Arts
Travel
Food
Health/Science
Body & Soul

Utah Catholics greet venerated relic

By Rhina Guidos
The Salt Lake Tribune

Andrew Walther arrived in Salt Lake City on Wednesday evening with faith in a suitcase.

Since May, he has crossed more than a dozen times among various states while carrying a 400-year-old statue in a box and a 472-year-old snippet of cloth in a suitcase.

These trips with the Tilma of Tepeyac relic have thrust Walther and his luggage into the arms of suspicious airport security cops.

It is a chore fit for Job.

The cloth is cut from a burlaplike cloak believed by many Catholics to have belonged to St. Juan Diego and has drawn thousands of Catholic faithful to churches for a chance to glimpse the holy fabric.

But heaven, apparently, isn't exempt from airport screeners working for the Transportation Security Administration.

"You get a lot of reaction, especially from security people," said Walther, who is one of four members of the Apostolate of Holy Relics in Los Angeles tasked with safely moving the relics around.

The relic and the statuette must pass through X-ray machines in 21 cities during a national tour that ends in early December.

In St. Louis, security officers took one look and nearly rushed the reliquary -- the case where the statue is carried -- away.

"They didn't know what it was," Walther said. "They saw that it was big and it was metal. Since they'd never seen it before, their first impulse was to be safe."

Walther hurriedly pulled out a Washington Post story about the unusual luggage to mollify nervous security officers. He has learned for such occasions to carry a stack of such articles describing his precious cargo.

Thomas Serafin, president of the Apostolate, also has accompanied the relic on trips.

"It attracts the curious and the faithful," he said. "When they X-ray the case, they want to open it and see what it is. It



In the company of clergy, students and the Knights of Columbus, the tilma, a relic of Juan Diego's cape bearing the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, is taken from the auditorium at Draper's Juan Diego High School to the chapel in Draper on Thursday. (Steve Griffin/The Salt Lake Tribune)

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happens everywhere."

In some instances, non-Catholic security officers have called around an airport to see if Catholics on duty wanted to see it. In St. Louis, after the initial scare passed, about a half dozen Catholic officers gathered around the relic and prayed, Walther said.

For most of the trip, however, the baggage travels with little fanfare.

Since airline rules prohibit the relic carriers from keeping the briefcase on their lap, the Saintry cloth is simply tucked

away in overhead compartments, along with the usual piles of carry-on luggage, toiletries, blankets and pillows.

While traveling with history, it's best to keep a low-profile, Walther said. "To people, it's just one more briefcase."

Looking at it, most people wouldn't even know that the half-inch square of cactus fiber has value.

"It's not like a diamond necklace," Walther said.

But relics, these days, can fetch a high price for those who sell them. Though Walther wouldn't name the financial worth of the cloth he said it is insured "in the mid-five figures."

Because of its value, it is rarely left alone. Serafin said that at least two people from the Apostolate travel with the Tilma relic. When the relic is in a church that keeps its door open for a round-the-clock veneration period one of them sleeps while the other keeps an eye on it.

But the real worth, they say, is the faith that the relic inspires.

"I feel more like a messenger than anything else," Walther said.

People stand in line, children in tow, for up to two hours to see it. The relic was given to the Diocese of Los Angeles in 1941 as a gift from the bishop of Mexico City. When the tour ends at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral in December it will be enshrined at a cathedral in Los Angeles, never to tour again.

While in Salt Lake City until Saturday, the Tilma relic is stationed at Draper's Juan Diego Catholic High School.

Walther recalled that during a procession in Denver, a group of Latino construction workers turned off their equipment and bowed their heads while the statue and the relic passed. They have seen people moved to tears. They have seen others renew their faith.

"I think about that when walking around with [the relic] in a brief case," he said. "And it's a little humbling."

rguidos@sltrib.com



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webmaster@sltrib.com