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Piece of Juan Diego's Tilma Displayed at Mission Hills

By Francisco Castro

MISSION HILLS—Don and Irene Kershnik have always wanted to see San Juan Diego's Tilma bearing the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe at the Basilica de Guadalupe in Mexico City, but haven't been able to do it.

On Sunday, a piece of that tilma came to them. The half-inch square piece of cloth was on display for parishioners to venerate at San Fernando Mission Rey de España in Mission Hills, where the relic had been in storage since 1981 under the care of Monsignor Francis Weber. The piece of the tilma came from one of the edge's of the cloak, which is on display in Mexico City. Msgr. Weber said the piece was cut from the cloak when it was reframed.



Despite being at the Mission for more than 20 years, this was the first time it was available for viewing at the church, said Msgr. Weber. Over 200 people had a chance to see it up close. The visit at the church was one of several stops in the U.S. tour of the Tilma de Tepeyac, which began in May of this year and will last through December as it visits over 21 cities around the country.

According to the story, on December 12, 1531, a poor Indian named Juan Diego was seeking water for his uncle in a desolate area north of Mexico City. Suddenly, on a hillside, he saw a vision of the Virgin Mary, who directed him to a water spring. A few days later, in the same spot, the vision appeared again. This time, she instructed him to go to Mexico City to tell the high church officials to build a church in her name on that site. Incredulous, the church official asked for proof. When Juan Diego returned to the hillside and the Virgin appeared again, he asked her for proof. Roses appeared, even though roses do not normally bloom in that area in December. He gathered them into his rough Indian tilma (blanket) and took them to the ecclesiastical official. When he arrived, he opened his tilma and he fell to his knees in veneration and amazement. Imprinted on Juan Diego's tilma was the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, exactly as Juan Diego had seen her. It is said that the image is so perfect in detail that one sees in the pupil of the Virgin's eye the image of Juan Diego. Scientists who have studied the Tilma have concluded that "it is not of this world."

The tour of the Tilma de Tepeyac is being organized by the Apostolate for Holy Relics. The Los Angeles based, non-profit corporation is dedicated to preserving Catholic heritage and promoting and educating people about the importance of the relics, said Andrew Walther, AHR vice president. Walther said there are two reasons for the tour. First, Juan Diego's canonization last year by Pope John Paul II during his latest visit to Mexico has generated a lot of interest. Second, this is the year of the Rosary for Catholics, and the tilma is a relic associated with Virgin Mary, which is closely associated with the Rosary. Also, it's a chance for people who can't go to Mexico City to see a piece of the Tilma in their hometown. "We hope that this pilgrimage will give those people who cannot go on pilgrimage to Mexico City an opportunity to share in the graces and blessings bestowed by Our Lady of Guadalupe," said Walther.

That was exactly the case for the Kershniks, who said they had been waiting to see the piece of the Tilma ever since the tour was announced. "It's great for us who can't get down to [the Basilica of] Guadalupe," said Irene, who came from Northridge specifically for the event.

The relic, the only known piece ever detached from the original tilma was given to Archbishop John Cantwell of Los Angeles by the Archbishop of Mexico City, Luis Maria Martinez, in 1941 as a gift commemorating Archbishop Cantwell's visit to Mexico City that year. The gift was meant to symbolize the deep ties that existed between the peoples of Mexico City and Los Angeles, said Walther. After several years, the piece of Tilma was entrusted to the care of Msgr. Weber in 1981 and placed in the archives of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, which are located at the San Fernando Mission. It had remained there until this year, when the tour began.

Next, the Tilma de Tepeyac tour will continue in Arizona, Detroit, Salt Lake City, Philadelphia and New York City. After the completion of the tour, the piece of Tilma will return to Los Angeles and will be on permanent display at the newly built Cathedral of Los Angeles.

The San Fernando Valley Sun contacted the Los Angeles Archdiocese to ask why this important relic had been in storage since 1981 in Mission Hills and had never been on public display before now, but our phone calls were not returned.

[top of page](#)

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