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## Church of Dallas

### Thousands flock to cathedral to see Juan Diego relic

by MARTY PERRY

DALLAS. An estimated 16,000 people, many in costumes of Aztec Indians, saw a relic of the famous tilma of St. Juan Diego in what event planners said was the most colorful and joyous reception yet on a nationwide tour.

The half-inch square piece is part of the nearly 500-year-old outer garment bearing the image of the Virgin Mary, which captivated the imagination of the indigenous people of Mexico and led to their massive conversion to Catholicism in the 1500s.

The relic, safely in a monstrance, was carried Sunday by a horse-drawn carriage accompanied by hundreds of dancers and members of the Knights of Columbus along a street to the downtown Cathedral Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The cathedral is the only one in the United States dedicated to the Mexican apparition.

Cathedral officials said an estimated 16,000 people saw the relic on its three-day Dallas stop before it left Tuesday for Palm Beach, Fla. The relic was also seen by thousands in San Antonio on its two-city Texas tour.

"When they told me what I was going to be carrying, I said, 'You don't have to tell me. I went to Catholic schools for eight years and I learned all about it,' " Bunny Morrissey said, who brought the relic to the Cathedral in a horse-drawn carriage.

He was accompanied by Deacon Charlie Stump, himself a convert to Catholicism from a Baptist tradition. Deacon Stump serves at the cathedral, which has more than 18,000 members — the largest parish in Dallas.

The procession included the Fourth Degree Knights of Columbus Color Corps and representatives of the Mexican Consulate. A group of youngsters who recently made their



**Ofelia Flores reaches out to touch a relic of St. Juan Diego's tilma after the relic's arrival to the cathedral in Dallas Sept. 14. (Photo by Robert Bunch)**



**A piece of St. Juan Diego's tilma will be on display at the Cathedral Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Dallas Sept. 14-16.**

## TILMA FACTS

*Texas Catholic* has researched some popular questions about the tilma:

### How old is the tilma?

The image on the tilma is believed to have appeared in December 1531, which would make the tilma at least 472 years old.

### What fiber is the tilma made from?

It is commonly believed that Juan Diego's tilma is made from agave, or cactus plant, fibers that have an average lifespan of 20-30 years. But because access to the actual tilma is so difficult, the mystery remains over just what fiber was used.

John Chiment, a paleontologist at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., argues otherwise. He concluded that after examining the fibers and comparing them with Cornell's vast library of fibers, the tilma was not made of agave. Rather, he believes the tilma is likely made from hemp, a plant that is native to Mexico. Hemp fibers are one of the strongest around, which

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First Communion greeted the tilma with a procession of flowers.

Thomas J. Serafin, president of the Apostolate for Holy Relics in Los Angeles, who brought the piece of cloth encased in a reliquary to Dallas, said the arrangements made by the Dallas Diocese were the most impressive of the entire tour. He credited Dallas Bishop Charles Grahmann, Cathedral rector Father Ramón Alvarez and Deacon Stump for the warm reception.

"In the future, whenever we make trips, we will compare them to the D-standard, or Dallas standard," Serafin said.

The tilma is considered the most recognizable religious symbol in Latin America, said Father Alvarez.

"As we grow up as Latinos, one of the very first things we are taught is devotion to Our Lady," Father Alvarez said. "She is a symbol of unity and the sanctity of human life."

Bishop Charles Grahmann celebrated a Mass Sept. 14 at the cathedral as the relic was put on display for veneration. At the welcoming Mass, he said, "Never, never did I dream that this relic would visit in this cathedral. It is with deep emotion that I celebrate this Mass today in the presence of the relic of St. Juan Diego's tilma."

The relic was guarded round-the-clock. Serafin said they have never put a monetary value on it.

"You don't put a price on faith," he said.

Added Father Alvarez, "There is no real price value. Can you put a price value on God? It was God who touched that cloak."

Guadalupe Minjarez, who was born Dec. 12 -- the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe -- and named after the Blessed Virgin, said she identifies closely with the story of St. Juan Diego because "he was a representative of the poor people."

"Through him, we got to know Our Lady better," said the 85-year-old Dallas woman, a member of Immaculate Conception Parish in Grand Prairie, who came to see the relic with her daughter Bertha Rosales, 58.

The tilma belongs to the Archdiocese of Mexico City, but a small piece was given by Archbishop Luis Maria Martinez as a gift to Archbishop John J. Cantwell of Los Angeles, who led a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City in 1941. When not on tour, the only known relic of the tilma in the United States is stored in a locket that adorns a 17th-century statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the archives of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles allowed the Apostolate for Holy Relics — a non-profit corporation dedicated to educating the public about saints and preserving important pieces of Catholic heritage — to undertake the tour to commemorate St. Juan Diego's canonization and to spread devotion to the Blessed Virgin this Year of the Rosary. The 20-diocese tour began in May.

Chiment said explains the remarkable preservation of the tilma for nearly 500 years.

However, the veracity of Chiment's finding has been questioned. Father Elizondo said it cannot be proved whether or not Chiment's fiber samples actually came from the tilma.

### **What substance is the image made from?**

According to Father Virgil Elizondo, a priest of the San Antonio Archdiocese and author/researcher of St. Juan Diego's life, the paint used for the image cannot be explained.

For example, he said, the pigment used is unknown, and some of the colors have kept their brightness and/or have not cracked over nearly 500 years and with no varnish to protect them.

### **What tests have been done on the tilma?**

These are just some of the tests done to prove the tilma's authenticity:

- In the 18th century, scientists who studied the tilma concluded it was not possible to paint such an image on that kind of

fabric.

- In 1979, Americans Philip Callahan and Jody B. Smith studied the image with infrared rays and discovered to their surprise that there was no trace of paint and that the fabric had not been treated with any kind of technique.

- Another famous test, performed in 1936 by Richard Kuhn, who won the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1938, studied the image and found that it did not have natural, animal or mineral colorings. Synthetic coloring had not been invented yet. He concluded the image's origin is unexplainable.

- In 1999, Leoncio A. Garza-Valdes, a microbiologist and amateur archaeologist from San Antonio, took ultraviolet and infrared photographs of the image. He concluded that the image is actually three different paintings on top of each other.

- Studies of Mary's eyes in the last half of the century have brought about claims of the image of Juan Diego reflected in her pupils.

### **How is the tilma stored at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City?**

The tilma is visible through a glass casing above the

basilica's altar. Access to the tilma is only available through a guarded vault door behind the casing. The image can be turned around inside the vault for studies after the basilica is closed.

"They're afraid to take the glass off because it's so well-preserved," Father Elizondo said. "The latest studies have come through the glass."

### **Has the tilma ever been moved?**

Father Elizondo said he knows of one time when the tilma was moved — during the Mexican Revolution early in the 1920s.

"It was taken out secretly and hidden," Father Elizondo said. It is believed that priests took the image to a family home in Mexico City. It is also argued that it was during that time that the tilma was "touched up" in several places.

### **Has the tilma been "touched up"?**

According to Father Elizondo, yes, the tilma has been touched up in a few places. "But scientific tests show that the original image (underneath) is as old as it is said to be," he said.

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