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Relic of St. Juan Diego to begin national tour in Denver

By Roxanne King
Catholic News Service

DENVER (CNS) -- Some 20 million pilgrims a year trek to Mexico City to visit the awe-inspiring cloth enshrined there bearing the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. And now, a piece of the cloth is coming to Denver.

The Tilma of Tepeyac Tour will make available a relic of St. Juan Diego's tilma, or cloak, to more than a dozen dioceses around the country over the next several months for public veneration. The tour, which includes stops in Chicago and Springfield, Ill., will begin in Denver May 30-June 1 and will end in New York, where it will be on display Dec. 5-7.

Relics are personal remains and effects of saints. The relic coming to Denver consists of a tiny rectangular piece of the saint's tilma. It is encased in a reliquary attached to a silver chain, which is draped over a 17th-century statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The cloth is surrounded by relics of other saints, including St. Francis Xavier and St. Teresa of Avila.

The tour, which includes 16 stops, is being sponsored by the Apostolate for Holy Relics, which is dedicated to increasing appreciation and understanding of relics and the saints associated with them. The event aims to promote devotion to Mary during this Year of the Rosary proclaimed by Pope John Paul II, said Andrew Walther, vice president of the apostolate.

"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," Walther said. "We also hope that people will take the faith and devotion of St. Juan Diego as a model for their own lives."

There will be no cost to visit the relic at Denver's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, where it will be displayed.

"It's very exciting," said Mar Munoz-Visoso, head of the Archdiocese of Denver's Hispanic Ministry Office. "We're going to be blessed with having a piece of the actual clothing Juan Diego was wearing when our Blessed Mother appeared to him."

Particularly exciting, she said, is that the tour visit takes place shortly before the opening of Centro San Juan Diego, the new Hispanic center in the Denver Archdiocese. It will train faith formation leaders to serve the burgeoning Hispanic population and will provide education and outreach to needy Hispanics.

"Especially since the center is named after him (Juan Diego), it's, in a sense, like he's paying a visit to us right at the time we are opening his home in northern Colorado," Munoz-Visoso said. Centro San Juan Diego is expected to open mid-summer.

In 1531 Mary appeared four times to Juan Diego, a poor Indian, on Tepeyac Hill outside modern-day Mexico City and instructed him to tell the bishop she wanted a church built at the site. The bishop complied with the request after being convinced of the genuineness of the apparition by the evidence of a life-size image of Mary, which miraculously appeared on the saint's outer garment.

In 1754 Pope Benedict XIV declared Dec. 12 as the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. She was later designated patroness of the Americas. Last July, Pope John Paul II canonized Juan Diego in Mexico City. His feast day is Dec. 9.

The Guadalupe image, which continues to baffle scientists, is now the most recognizable religious symbol in Latin America, and devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe is a favorite of Catholics throughout the Americas. The Guadalupe icon has been adopted by numerous causes, including the pro-life movement, which entrusts the unborn to the pregnant Madonna's protection.

Mexico City's Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, where the saint's tilma is enshrined, is the most visited Marian shrine in the world, according to the Apostolate for Holy Relics.

Unique to Mary's appearance in Mexico is that she left something behind -- her image on the tilma. What makes the tilma even more extraordinary, said Tom Serafin, president of the apostolate, is that "it was handled by the Blessed Mother."

"You don't have to believe in relics or in miracles or apparitions, but the church approves of these, which have been authenticated, as helps to our faith," Munoz-Visoso said.

After Denver, the relic goes to New Haven, Conn.; La Crosse, Wis.; Springfield, Ill.; Sacramento, Calif.; Chicago; Gary, Ind.; Washington; New Orleans; Detroit and Grand Rapids, Mich.; Dallas; Palm Beach, Fla.; Phoenix and Tucson, Ariz.; Salt Lake City; and New York.

This relic of St. Juan Diego is likely the only one in the United States, according to Msgr. Francis J. Weber, archivist for the Los Angeles Archdiocese. Msgr. Weber said it was given to Los Angeles Archbishop John Cantwell in 1941 by Archbishop Luis Maria Martinez of Mexico City. For years it was housed in the archives museum of the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

Currently on loan for the tour, it is to be returned to Los Angeles in time to celebrate the feast days of St. Juan Diego and Our Lady of Guadalupe in December. More information is available on the [Apostolate for Holy Relics' Web site](#).

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