

California Is Linked to Guadalupe
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California Catholic Heritage Msgr. Francis J. Weber

In mid-1941 the Apostolic Delegate to Mexico invited Archbishop John J. Cantwell to make a pilgrimage to the National Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The southland prelate was anxious to comply for many reasons, mostly because “a visit by our people to the City of Mexico would be a gracious compliment to the Hierarchy and Catholics of a country that has sent so many of its children to California.”

A Solemn Pontifical Mass was celebrated at the shrine on Oct. 12. It was a gala event, attended by a military delegation representing the President of Mexico. The entire diplomatic corps turned out to welcome the archbishop and his party.

SPEAKING OVER the National Broadcasting System from Mexico, Cantwell observed that “the missions built in California are our title deeds to show to the newcomers that we of the Old Church are in California by the right of inheritance.” He concluded by praying that “the traditions that made Mexico distinguished and honorable in the past may be perpetuated in a fuller measure in years to come, and that the glory of the days gone by may be surpassed” by the pledge of the future.

The visit marked a thawing in the delicate relations then existing between the Church and State in Mexico. From all indications the event was favorably in all quarters.

FOLLOWING CANTWELL’S return to Los Angeles, Archbishop Luis Maria Martinez of Mexico City proposed to the Canons of the National Basilica that a most appropriate way of commemorating the visit would be to present a relic of Juan Diego’s tilma to the Archbishop of Los Angeles. He pointed out that, even then, Los Angeles boasted a larger Mexican population than any city in the world outside of the Distrito Federal. The Canons agreed with the proposal and delegated a “Father Gomez” to personally bring a small rectangular piece of the famed tilma, encased in a silver reliquary to Los Angeles.

Cantwell was understandably pleased with the gesture and received the relic with great devotion. Very likely it marked the first (and last) time a piece of the tilma had ever left Mexican soil.

THE ARCHBISHOP entrusted the relic to Father Fidencio Esparza, a Mexican-born priest from Guadalajara who had long been active among the southland's Hispanic community. Late in 1981, forty years after the historic trek to Mexico by Cantwell, Cardinal Timothy Manning headed another pilgrimage to the National Shrine. Upon his return to Los Angeles, Msgr. Esparza confided the relic to His Eminence for final deposit. It was then placed on permanent display in the Historical Museum attached to the Archival Center. The relic, the only known segment ever detached from the original tilma, is draped over an artistic 17th century statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. And it is highly significant that it be preserved in such surrounding. For beneath the tilma of Our Lady, Fray Francisco Garcia Diego y Moreno received Episcopal ordination as the first bishop of Ambas Californias on Oct. 4, 1840. It all began for modern California at Guadalupe. Reprinted with permission of The Tidings