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1,400 Celebrate Sight Of Holy Catholic Relic

By Jose Antonio Vargas

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Margarita Vasco took off her glasses and wiped her cheeks with a white handkerchief, the rosary beads hanging on her right arm. She cried long and she cried hard.

▼ ADVERTISING "I cannot believe I'm seeing this," Vasco said in Spanish, pointing to the fragment -- no more than a half-inch in size -- that Catholics say bears the image of Mary, the Mother of God. The fragment, a holy relic of the church and secured in a golden reliquary, rested yesterday afternoon on the altar at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Northeast Washington.

The image is "*una milagrosa*" -- a big miracle -- to Vasco, and she and about 1,400 parishioners from the Washington area attended a special Mass and, in a light rain, walked in a procession to honor it.

According to Catholic teaching, Mary appeared to the Nahua Indian Juan Diego, an Aztec peasant, at Tepeyac Hill, just outside Mexico City, in 1531. She asked Diego to tell the bishop of Mexico City that she wanted a church to be built on the hill. Diego tried, twice, but the bishop doubted him -- the bishop wanted some sign, some symbol. So, Mary appeared to Diego and placed roses, which blossomed despite the harsh winter, in his *tilma*, or cloak. When he opened it to show the bishop, a colorful image -- not a painting -- of the Virgin Mary was imprinted on the cloak.

The original tilma, with the image still visible, is kept in a cathedral on the site of the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and is one of the most popular religious sites in the world, drawing 20 million people each year. Pope John Paul II, in a visit to Mexico in July 2002, canonized Juan Diego, naming him Saint Juan Diego.

"More than anything else, the relic is a reminder of one of the greatest moments in the history of the Catholic Church," said Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, the archbishop of Washington, as he greeted parishioners outside the basilica. The relic is a piece of the original tilma that was given to the archbishop of Los Angeles in 1941, McCarrick said.

The Tilma of Tepeyac Tour will be in Baltimore today and tomorrow at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

A study once said that one in 10 Catholics worldwide is Mexican, said Karla Montoya, 27, who until January lived in Hermosillo, Sonora, in northwestern Mexico. Now in Silver Spring and working as a nanny, Montoya heard about yesterday's celebration from her church.



Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick holds the Tilma of Tepeyac fragment during a procession. (Ricky Carioti -- The Washington Post)

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"The Our Lady of Guadalupe and the story of Juan Diego is important -- not just to Mexicans but to Latin Americans," said Montoya, her eyes fixed on the altar. The singing of a mariachi band, which for a half-hour serenaded the relic and the image of the Our Lady of Guadalupe on the altar, made Montoya smile.

For Vasco, Our Lady of Guadalupe has been a loving spirit to her family. She said she needs guidance now. Her 36-year-old daughter divorced two months ago and has sons ages 4 and 6, is undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer. Vasco arrived a few weeks ago from Medellin, Colombia, and is staying with her daughter and grandsons in Germantown.

"I need her help," Vasco said, her voice breaking, her eyes fighting back tears. "My daughter needs her help."

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