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Piece of venerated cloak draws faithful

'POWERFUL SYMBOL'

By Jim Jordan
HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER

Thousands of the faithful and the curious came to St. Paul Catholic Church yesterday to attend Mass and see what Father Hank Kenney called "a powerful symbol of God's love, God's compassion."

A half-inch-square piece of the cloak St. Juan Diego was wearing in 1531 when, Catholics believe, he met the Virgin Mary was brought to the Lexington church to be displayed for one day.

The rest of the cloak, known as the Tilma of-Tepeyac, is emblazoned with the image of Mary and is on display in Mexico City where millions of pilgrims go to view it every year.

About 3,000 Catholics -- and a few Protestants -- viewed the relic at St. Paul yesterday, said Andrew Walther, coordinator of the tour that will take the relic to 20 cities this year.

"This is stop six," he said.

For Catholics, the experience of seeing the bit of inexpensive cloth is "a once-in-a-lifetime thing," said Shirley Montague, who has worshiped at St. Paul for 45 years.

"It's a beautiful thing; it's just a very emotional thing," she said. "It's very inspirational. Everybody should have an opportunity to see something like this."

The outpouring of viewers reflects the strength of the religious community in Lexington, said Tony Martina, who also attends St. Paul.

"Just the number of people who have shown up today proves that there's still a lot of people with a lot of faith," Martina said. "Look at the church. It's full. Regardless of what people say, the proof's here."

Kenney, a Jesuit priest who conducted the afternoon Mass, said several St. Paul members told him they had not intended to go to church yesterday, but they found themselves at St. Paul anyway.

"There's some power in this thing," he said. "It did them a lot of good."

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According to Catholic tradition, the Virgin Mary appeared to a Mexican peasant named Juan Diego in 1531. She instructed him to tell the bishop of Mexico City to build a church in her honor on the site of an old pagan temple on a hilltop called Tepeyac.

To convince the bishop that Juan Diego was her messenger, Mary miraculously imprinted her image on Juan Diego's cloak and caused roses to bloom in December. Juan Diego took the flowers to the bishop as sign of his authority.

Kenney told the faithful during the Mass that Mary's choice of a poor, lowly peasant as her messenger reflects God's compassion for the poor and the oppressed.

The image of Mary on the cloak "is a potent symbol of the church of the future, a church that celebrates diversity, gives power to the poor and speaks with the voice of compassion," he said.

"Where such a church lives," Kenney added, "roses bloom in December."

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