

## **Curtain rising on church**

### **An old Mexico City theater is being restored for its new role as a sanctuary to honor San Juan Diego.**

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MEXICO - A former theater for children and backdrop to Mexican film stars was blessed by Pope John Paul II Thursday as it undergoes conversion into the Sanctuary of Saint Juan Diego. The pope stopped briefly in front of the Moorish-style building and made the sign of the cross as thousands of onlookers cheered and whistled.

The site is a few blocks from the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, where Juan Diego was canonized Wednesday as a saint of the Catholic Church.

In her rush to squeeze through a broken wall into the sanctuary plaza, 75-year-old Teresa Martinez Aguilar was knocked down, scraping her elbow and sullyng her traditional beribboned Oaxacan dress.

"That doesn't matter to me," she said afterward, rubbing tears from her eyes. "I can't describe how I feel. We are of one heart."

After the pope's blessing, people flooded the plaza of the sanctuary to view a new statue of Juan Diego. The façade of the building, which once was a chapel, appeared in many Mexican movies of the 1940s and 1950s, starring film legends such as Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, Fernando Soto Mantequilla and David Silva.

"There's a very elegant salon inside," said Maria Guadalupe Guerrero Sandoval, 53, who attended her graduation at the sanctuary when it belonged to the Lions Club in the 1960s. "It was one of the most elegant in Mexico during its time."

Around 1970, the chapel was converted into a cinema for children and remained so for many years. The inside has fallen into ruin, with gaping holes in the ceiling and smelly and suspect plumbing. Painted cartoon images of Disney characters cover the walls and popcorn remains in the concession stands.

"When it was a cinema, people would walk by and make the sign of the cross, thinking it was still a sanctuary," Guerrero said. "I'm so happy they're turning it into a chapel again."

As recently as six months ago, the plaza was overrun with drug addicts, thieves and prostitutes. Several days ago, basilica officials put up a tall gate to keep people out, Guerrero said.

Other residents of Colonia Linda Vista, where the sanctuary is located, said they didn't believe the chapel was an appropriate location to dedicate to Mexico's homeland saint.

"We're happy that Juan Diego is now a saint, but he deserves a place that's worthy of him," Alejandro Cruz Sanchez said. "You watch. Tomorrow, this place will be full of delinquents and street people."

But others, including Sister Raquel Martinez Zavala, said they were pleased the new Indian saint has a sanctuary. Martinez and a large group of nuns from the Siervas Guadalupanas de Cristo Sacerdote of Tlupetlac lined up in front of the sanctuary and did the "wave" with their gold and white flags in anticipation of the pope's arrival.

"It's such a pleasure that we now have a saint that's all our own," Martinez said. "As an indigena, he is completely of this country. He's one of us."

Others traveled to the new Sanctuary of Saint Juan Diego to give thanks for a miracle, or to pray for one. Juana Lara Guevara brought her 13-year-old daughter, Reina Karen Lara, who has Down syndrome and will undergo a heart operation in September.

"I wanted her to be here so she could be blessed by the pope," Lara said of her daughter, who wore a traditional snow-white dress. "And I know that she has been blessed."

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