

For S.A. pilgrims, basilica offers unique blessing Group finds 'special' link

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MEXICO - Tears spilled and prayers were murmured. Foreheads anointed with holy water glistened in glowing candlelight. Portraits of Juan Diego were kissed and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe blessed. Pilgrims from San Antonio on Monday drank in the ambient spirituality of the Basilica of Guadalupe, named for Mexico's 16th century manifestation of the Virgin Mary.

With slim chance of seeing the pope during Wednesday's Mass to canonize Juan Diego, the Indian to whom the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared in 1531, the visit to the basilica figured to be the highlight of their trip.

San Antonio resident Judy Pfeifer knelt, wept and lighted candle after candle at the foot of the blinding white marble altar encircled by snowy gladiolas in the basilica's Chapel of San Jose.

"I've always had a strong devotion to Our Blessed Lady," she explained over the floating voices of a chorale practicing for Wednesday. "I wanted once in my life to be able to go to a natural place where she appeared to Indians who were humble and poor and simple of heart."

After a year marked by the slow death of her sister to cancer and the sudden death of a nephew who was a priest, both around the time of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Pfeifer came here, in part, to erase the grief from her heart.

But she will leave with a newfound sense of commitment to the Virgin of Guadalupe and a strengthened desire to be a missionary in Mexico.

"That's what I feel is the gift I'm receiving here during my visit," she said.

Followers of the Virgin, some of whom call themselves Guadalupanas, traveled on moving walkways past the cloak supposedly worn by Juan Diego and miraculously imbued with the image of the Virgin when she appeared to him.

Framed for preservation purposes, it is suspended about 30 feet above viewers.

"His capa is made of maguey, and it was exposed for many, many years," said Alma Griffin, who posed with other Guadalupanas for snapshots in front of the Virgin's image. "It should have been dissolved, but it hasn't. That's the miracle."

Griffin and other Guadalupanas traveled 24 hours on a bus from San Antonio, during which they told jokes, recited the rosary and discussed the best strategy for getting into the basilica and close to the pope.

After arriving bleary-eyed at 4 a.m. Saturday, they've been going nonstop ever since, if not making visits to the basilica area to check out security patterns and papal routes, then watching Juan Diego movies on television, such as the 1970s classic "La Virgen de Guadalupe," starring Fernando Allende as Juan Diego.

San Antonio resident Anita Garcia leaned in close to kiss the basilica's latest rendition of Juan Diego, a high-cheeked, pale-skinned man with the beard of a Spanish conquistador.

Much squabbling has arisen over the image, which bears little physical resemblance to Mexico's original Indian inhabitants.

"We were raised knowing that the Virgin of Guadalupe was the mother of God, and she appeared to Juan Diego," said Garcia, who recently discovered at a family reunion that her grandfather had been an Indian from Oaxaca.

But her mother's side of the family was from Monterrey, having arrived directly from Spain. And her mestizo history has erased any conflict over the image of Juan Diego for her, and the friend accompanying her, Cristela Moreno.

"It's a portrait, nada mas (that's all)," Moreno said.

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