

## Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Hermosa Beach welcomes restored painting

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The mariachi band's trumpets blasted Las Mananitas as the priestly procession made its way toward the right side of the altar at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Hermosa Beach.

The congregation held its collective breath in the dark sanctuary, where a large painting veiled by a metallic sheet was illuminated by a few overhead lights. Fresh roses carpeted the ledge of the indentation where the painting was hung, their saccharine smell

permeating the air.

With all the priests gathered at in front of the painting, Ray Mallett, a pastor at the church, reached up and grabbed the bottom of the veil, gently tugging it until it fell lightly.

The congregation burst into applause. Men and women removed their caps and the celebrant bishop kneeled before the glowing painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

This was a moving occasion Wednesday for the congregation that had been eagerly anticipating the return of the painting, which had been undergoing restoration since October.

The painting itself is an original, worth more than \$15,000, but beyond the monetary value of the piece, it holds incredible spiritual meaning and importance to the parishioners of the church.

"If you talk to a Catholic Mexican, they will refer to her as 'my mother,' " Mallett said. "This image has come to mean so much in people's lives. They have missed its presence. People wander into church to pray, and she is a source of prayer and devotion. It's really been missed."

The story behind Our Lady of Guadalupe originates in Mexico, where a man named Juan Diego had a supernatural encounter with the Virgin Mary. But when he told his bishop of the encounter, the bishop asked for proof. Juan Diego then asked the Virgin Mary to help him prove to the bishop that his encounter was real, so she instructed him to pick some roses, arrange them in his tilma, or peasant's robe, and present himself to the bishop.

Miraculously, Juan Diego was able to find roses-, which did not grow in that region. When he presented himself to the bishop and opened his robe, the roses fell out, revealing an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The tilma was preserved and is still displayed at the Basilica in Mexico City, serving as one of the most visited Marian shrines in the world. Believed by parishioners to be the patroness of the Americas, the image has been a source of prayers, with many Catholics asking the Virgin Mary to intercede on their behalf to deliver their requests to Jesus Christ.

“The Lady of Guadalupe is our mother and we always rely on her,” said Hilda Lopez, who has been attending the church since she was a child. “When you ask for something, you feel the peace in your heart. When you pray, it’s like asking for something from your mother.”

The painting at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church was done in 1951 and was cracking and deteriorating because of its age and a previous, faulty restoration.

When the church was undergoing remodeling, Paul Reis, vice president of John Paul’s Designs, housed most of the church’s art pieces, including that of the painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe. When he saw it, he was shocked.

“I asked Ray if he knew that it was an original oil painting,” Reis said. “He told me that someone had painted it and given it to the church in Hermosa Beach but he didn’t know who the artist was. It was framed so badly and no one knew how important this piece was, both to Hermosa Beach and that church.”

After the church raised enough money for the restoration and reframing, totaling at \$8,000, Reis finally sent the piece to Gustavo Perez, who is better known as “The Master Restorer.” He not only repainted parts of the painting, but had to remount the original cloth onto a stronger piece of canvas.

The piece was then sent back to Reis for framing, but Perez and Reis both noted oddities about the painting that they did not notice before.

One was an inscription, barely perceptible before the restoration, saying the painting was painted in Mexico, dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Hermosa Beach, and touched to the original image of Our Lady in the Basilica, making it blessed and unique.

But the second oddity startled Reis.

“The eyes open and close at different angles,” Reis said. “We’re aware of that aspect on the original painting at the Basilica, and the degree to which this piece is copied from the original means the artist was not an amateur.”

Reis said working on the painting has been a humbling experience, one that has built up his faith.

“As a Catholic, to have an image like that, you just stand in awe of it,” Reis said. “You have something in your hands that is that important and revered.”

The benediction concluded well after midnight Wednesday and parishioners swarmed the newly revealed painting, bringing roses and small children dressed in traditional Mexican dresses.

Some posed and took pictures, while others stood quietly and bowed their heads in prayer, but all welcomed her return in their own way.

“It’s her birthday!” Lupe Vargas said with a big smile. “I feel so blessed to see her. It’s a really good feeling in my heart to see the picture of her.”