News



Onlookers at the site of an image some believe to represent the Virgin Mary in April 2005, days after it was first spotted. (Chicago Sun-Times file photo)



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The silhouette-like image that some believe looked like and might be a sign from the Virgin Mary on a wall beneath the Kennedy Expressway has endured a lot since it was first spotted in 2005.

A vandal once scribbled "Big Lie" over the shape. Skeptics saw it as a watermark with only a coincidental resemblance to the outline of Jesus' mother, as commonly portrayed.

Citing safety as crowds had begun gathering there, public works crews tried covering the image with brown paint. That later was scrubbed away by two employees from a nearby car wash wielding degreasing compound.



Obdulia Delgado at the site on the Kennedy Expressway's Fullerton Avenue underpass where in 2005 she first spotted what she thinks is an image of the Virgin Mary (Chicago Sun-Times/Robert Herguth)

More graffiti, along with time and the elements, have made any remaining contours difficult to identify. And scattered garbage and piles of rubble have replaced the saint candles, flowers, stuffed animals and written prayer requests that for much of the past 20 years made the site along the Fullerton Avenue underpass one of the Chicago area's most-enduring makeshift shrines.

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Now, the site is inaccessible, behind a chain-link fence and locked gate as the Illinois Department of Transportation has the area cordoned off for a bridge construction project. But agency officials say the repairs to the wall haven't affected the site of the image.



Employees from a car wash cleaning graffiti and paint in May 2005 that covered the image of what some said they thought represented the Virgin Mary on the Fullerton Avenue underpass of the Kennedy Expressway. (Chicago Sun-Times file photo)

Obdulia Delgado, 52, of Portage Park, who first spotted the image, hopes it survives and that a new generation of Chicagoans might get something from what she believes is a real sign from Mary.



The makeshift shrine at the Fullerton Avenue underpass in April 2005 (Chicago Sun-Times file photo)

"We need her," Delgado says, standing in the underpass as traffic roared above and unhoused people slept nearby. "Especially with our busy world and all the crime that doesn't stop, all the sadness. We need her."

For those who scoff at the notion of a message from Mary — revered among Catholics, particularly in Mexican culture, in which she's often known as Our Lady of Guadalupe — Delgado says: "Let's say you don't believe, but those that do believe, let them believe. Be happy."

On that April day two decades ago when she drove by and noticed the image, Delgado says she was going through a lot of personal turmoil, with a young child experiencing serious health problems, a troubled marriage and, least important but most immediate, final exams fast approaching for culinary classes she was taking.

She'd prayed to Mary for help — Catholics and some other Christians sometimes appeal to saints for what's described as intercession with God — and then, later, while driving, says she experienced what she believes was a miracle, feeling Mary's presence and seeing her on the wall.


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A Glenview man kneels in front of the image on the wall of the Kennedy Expressway underpass in April 2005. (Chicago Sun-Times file photo)

Though it took time, "peace" came to her life, and she largely credits God through Mary.

Her son's health improved. He's now 25. Her marriage ended, but she's now happily remarried. And she passed those exams though eventually left the restaurant field and became a bank teller.



A visitor at the makeshift shrine in 2011 (Chicago Sun-Times file photo)

"I still struggle," Delgado says. "I've gotten up, and I've gotten down."

But she says, "I'm at peace."

She still drives past the site — nicknamed by some "Our Lady of the Underpass" and "Virgin of the Viaduct" — several times a week. She says she's heartened when she sees passersby slowing down or looking toward the south-facing wall with the shape.

On a recent Sunday, four unhoused people appeared to be living outside the fenced-off area, a few feet away from what used to be a better-defined image in the belly of the viaduct.



The shrine as seen in 2017. (Chicago Sun-Times screenshot/YouTube)

"Hopefully, they have prayer," Delgado says, "and something good comes for them."

One of those people says she's well aware of the nearby Mary image and that "it gives me strength.

"Sometimes, I stand in front of it and say my Hail Marys," the woman says, asking for "strength" and "just keeping me off the streets, and if I have to be out here, just keeping me safe."



The Kennedy Expressway Fullerton Avenue underpass wall as it looks now. (Chicago Sun-Times/Robert Herguth)

"I thank her and God for each and every day," she says, declining to give her name.

She says she has a shoulder ailment that even feels better when she's in front of that wall.

These days, it's tough to see Mary in the image. But the woman says she can see her and has a message for anyone who'd hurt the image through graffiti or renovations: "Don't mess with her."

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