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Accord Nears on Returning Salvaged Gates of Cathedral

■ **Preservation:** The welder who has them says they can go back to St. Vibiana's site only if they serve as a monument to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

By GREG KRIKORIAN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The owner of eight wrought iron gates discarded two years ago from St. Vibiana's Cathedral moved closer Monday to returning them, but on one condition: They must be used for a new tribute to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Although the cathedral has been sold to a private developer and is scheduled to become a performing arts center and hotel, welder Dan Giles said Monday that he would sell back the gates only if they are used for their original function, part of a monument to the Virgin.

"They can't have them unless there is at least a painting of the Lady of Guadalupe there," said Giles, 60, of Silver Lake. "Otherwise, no deal."

Already, Giles said, he turned down one offer for the gates from a foreign investor.

"We never talked money but he didn't quibble about the price," said Giles, who had the gates up for auction for \$50,000 on the Internet.

Giles said he rejected the potential buyer when he learned that the man planned to use them to protect his collection of classic cars.

"I told him I can't do that, and he asked me, 'Why not?'" Giles said. "I said, 'Because for eight decades people have been praying before these gates. And for them to end up as garage doors? I just can't do that.'"

Giles took possession of the gates, each weighing several hundred pounds, in May 1999 while working at the earthquake-damaged St. Vibiana's. A supervisor for the work instructed Giles to haul away the gates and he has kept them in his yard ever since. Recently, Giles decided to sell them.

After his plans were disclosed in The Times last week, Giles was contacted by attorney Bill Delvac about returning the gates. Delvac represents the Los Angeles Conservancy and also has a long-standing relationship with the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Although the archdiocese and the conservancy support efforts to retrieve the gates, Delvac said, he is in charge of negotiations on behalf of a soon-to-be-formed non-profit foundation that will oversee the performing arts center.

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Delvac declined to discuss details of his discussion with Giles. He expressed optimism that they will reach an agreement.

After a meeting Saturday, Giles said, the two had reached a general agreement that he would receive \$5,000 and Delvac's help in getting building permits for his sister, who Giles said has spent three years trying to rebuild an apartment garage destroyed in an arson fire.

Now, the sticking point seems to be Giles' demand that when the gates are returned, they include some new tribute to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Archivist Questions Historical Value

"If they get them back, there would have to be a picture, a plaque, of the Virgin," Giles said.

How much the gates may be worth and when they were built remains unclear.

While many have assumed the gates were installed when the 1876 cathedral was expanded in 1922, archdiocese archivist Msgr. Francis J. Weber said he believed they might have been installed as recently as 1971.

"They may be valuable for the iron in them," he said, "but they are not historically valuable."

Sculptor Robert Graham, who designed the doors for the new cathedral, declined to weigh in on the fate or potential value of the gates.

"To my mind, he has already done the right thing by salvaging them," Graham said of Giles. "What happens to them now is up to him."

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