

Catholics react to priest carrying Olympic torch in China

TAIYUAN, China - Chinese Catholics expressed mixed feelings about a priest carrying the Olympic torch along its relay route in the Shanxi provincial capital.

Father Paul Meng Ningyou, vicar general of the Taiyuan Diocese and pastor of Immaculate Conception Cathedral, was the 122nd of 208 torchbearers when he ran June 26 in Taiyuan, an industrial city less than 250 miles southwest of Beijing, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

Some local Catholics who watched the live television broadcast of the relay told UCA News the TV anchor introduced Father Meng as a “religious personnel” of the Taiyuan Catholic cathedral who was elected a deputy of the Taiyuan People’s Congress in 2007.

Father Meng, 45, was the only religious worker to carry the torch in Taiyuan, and the only priest known to have done so since the relay began on the mainland May 4.

Father Meng told UCA News June 26 that he represented the five major religions in China – Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism and Taoism.

“This is God’s will that through this special way the Catholic Church could show the public it is no longer a marginalized group, but gradually plays a more active role in the society,” he said.

Government officials chose 100,000 people to line the relay route and arranged for special teams stationed along the way to cheer the torchbearers. Other people were prohibited from venturing outdoors during the relay.

A priest who teaches at Montecorvino Major Seminary in Taiyuan told UCA News he was glad to see Father Meng as a torchbearer, because it brought social recognition that “we Catholics are equal with all Chinese people.”

Catholics are a minority in Taiyuan, and suffer discrimination and injustice in some

rural areas, explained the priest, who requested anonymity. The Taiyuan Diocese has about 80,000 Catholics in a total population of 3 million.

Some seminarians told UCA News that although Father Meng's participation in the relay was a positive sign they believe authorities were cautious and limited his exposure on television.

An elderly Catholic layman who went only by Liu said he did not think the priest's participation would create much social impact, since Father Meng participated in his capacity as a local People's Congress deputy and not as a Catholic priest.

Counting the Taiyuan relay leg, the Olympic torch has been carried through 18 provinces and municipalities in China. The relay, which began in Greece and went through countries around the world before coming to Hong Kong, Macau and then the mainland, will end in Beijing before the Summer Olympics begin Aug. 8.