

Christmas at the Vatican

There are two places that I always dreamed it would be great to be for Christmas midnight Mass: Bethlehem or Rome. This year my wife and I got the chance to be in Rome, at the Vatican for Christmas, and it was amazing.

As a schola chanted hymns before Mass, the basilica filled up with cardinals, bishops and dignitaries, and people who had waited in St. Peter's Square as early as 2 p.m. to enter the basilica at 8:30 p.m. for the 10 p.m. "midnight" Mass. Those who were in the square early got to hear an hourlong concert around 5 p.m. that accompanied the unveiling of the Vatican's outdoor Nativity scene.

The outdoor crèche features figures that stand about 15 feet tall in a grotto next to a Christmas tree lit with green and blue lights and gold ornaments. Pope Benedict appeared silhouetted at his window toward the end of the concert for less than a minute and held one lit candle. Notable, the manger was empty, since the Christ child has not yet arrived.

Inside the basilica for the Mass, the altar is decorated with thousands of white flowers and assorted greens. A statue of the Madonna and Child against a red velvet background adorned the left side of the altar.

A Nativity scene inside the basilica, smaller than the one outside, also features an empty manger. The pope traditionally blesses the statue of the infant at the end of the midnight Mass.

Though the Mass is in Italian, the first reading, from Isaiah (Is 9, 1-6), was proclaimed in English and the second, from Titus, was in Spanish. Some responses were in Latin. The crowd came from all over the world.

Walking out of the basilica, a young woman cradled her child in her arms, and gently hummed "Silent Night" into her baby's ear. Perhaps, a couple millennia ago, Mary herself would have been humming to the infant Savior on this very night.

It was an incredible privilege to be a part of this international celebration of the birth of Christ at the heart of the heart of the church.

Someday ... Bethlehem.