

Churches in Spain experiment with staying open 24/7

VALENCIA, Spain - In 2002, Carlo Ravasio trekked more than 2,000 miles from Moscow to Valencia, stopping by churches along the way to pray for the unity of Christians.

But when the Italian pilgrim arrived at the churches, he encountered a recurring problem: The doors were locked.

In response, Father Miguel Angel Vives, pastor of Nativity of Our Lady of Burjassot Parish in Valencia, decided that for one year his church would never close its doors. In 2004, more than 66,000 visitors came at all hours of the day.

Ravasio "found few churches open on his journey. Churches are always closed in Spain. So I decided to open them," Father Vives told Catholic News Service.

"It's just the way I am. As a child, my house was always open," and churches should be no different, he said.

Churches in Spain and other parts of Europe are normally closed between Masses. One reason for this is the need to prevent theft, but Father Vives said there were fewer thefts at his church in 2004 than in previous years.

This year, with Ravasio's help, Father Vives is pushing a plan backed by the Archdiocese of Valencia to enlist 12 Catholic churches to open 24 hours a day for one month each.

So far, seven churches have signed up to unlock their doors; in late July, Father Vives was still looking for five more.

The priest said he is open to all places of worship, including mosques, joining his plan. In February and May, two evangelical churches participated in the priest's project.

"It is very hard" to find enough volunteers to keep churches open, he said.

“Yesterday I felt discouraged. But today, I feel like we can do it,” he said July 30, adding that he probably would not pursue the project again next year.

Father Juan Carlos Alemany, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Valencia, told El Pais newspaper that he adopted the 24-hour schedule in July to “reclaim the church as a space for personal prayer, a meeting place of silence and prayer that does not close when there are no more celebrations.”

One hundred volunteers at St. Francis worked in shifts at the church entrance around the clock to answer questions and guide visitors.

In August, Our Lady of the Angels Church took over as the church open 24/7.

Father Vives said worshipers are “superhappy” to have a place to pray and reflect in silence at any time of the day.

Valencia resident Isabel Vicent said the priest’s plan is a great service to the city, and it serves a higher purpose.

“Anything we do for God is a good idea,” she said.