

Foreign Catholics surprised to find church, Mass in Beijing

BEIJING – Some foreign Catholics attending the Beijing Olympics said they were surprised to discover that the Catholic Church operates in mainland China and the liturgy is the same as back home.

Philippine-American Rob Walsh – the father of Olympic swimmer James Walsh, who swam for the Philippines – was one of many visitors, including state leaders, who attended Mass Aug. 10 at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

Rob Walsh said his experience of Mass in Beijing is similar to what he is used to in the United States.

He was staying in Beijing for three weeks with family members and had attended two other Sunday Masses at the cathedral. Before that, he told UCA News, he had thought the Catholic Church was not allowed to function in China.

The historic cathedral, a 30-minute walk from Tiananmen Square, offers five Masses every Sunday – one in Latin, two in Chinese and two in English. Its facade recently has featured this message: “One hundred years of Olympics, dream comes true in China. Pray wholeheartedly, peace will prevail forever.”

Li Aoda, an 18-year-old Catholic volunteer at the cathedral, told UCA News she answered Walsh’s questions about the presence of the Catholic Church in China and explained that the country has no Catholic schools. Most visitors ask about Mass times, but few inquire about the local church situation, Li added.

Walsh acknowledged feeling that the Masses might be monitored to see if anyone says anything subversive.

“Most governments are afraid of things that could threaten them. We (in the United States) also have ‘big brothers’ watching,” he said.

Matthew Valletta and Sarah Leary, young American Catholics in Beijing to study Chinese, told UCA News they found out about the cathedral through friends in Beijing.

"I am really surprised to see so many people" at Mass, Mr. Valletta said. "I thought religions are deemed superstitious" and thus "not encouraged in China."

His Mass experience, he said, "was really beautiful because we were surrounded by people from around the world."

Ms. Leary, in her 20s, said she was surprised that the Chinese celebrant prayed for the pope at Mass since China has no diplomatic ties with the Vatican.

Cobei Ruiter, a tourist from the Netherlands who is not Catholic, had a different sense of the situation.

"The church looks normal and I don't see any military here," she said. "Every country has its way of looking at religion."

Security checks apparently were stepped up at the cathedral Aug. 10 for heads of state attending Mass. They included Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines; Henri, Grand Duke of Luxembourg; and Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Efi, Samoa's head of state.

According to the Beijing Diocese's Tianguang (Heavenly Light) Web site, Bishop Joseph Li Shan of Beijing received the state leaders after the Mass.

In China, the government requires the registration of church communities and their leaders. Some Chinese view registration as a tool for control and prefer to exercise the faith in a semiclandestine manner.

A White House press release said U.S. President George W. Bush attended an Aug. 10 service at Kuanjie Protestant Christian Church in Beijing. Bush was quoted as saying that he and his wife "had the great joy and privilege of worshiping here in Beijing" and "it just goes to show that God is universal, and God is love."

At a press interview the next day, he said the Beijing Olympics gave him a chance to

tell China's people: "Religion won't hurt you. You ought to welcome religious people." He added that he would seek a chance to tell Chinese leaders to "register the underground churches and give them a chance to flourish."