

Long lines of pilgrims pay last respects to Blessed John Paul

VATICAN CITY – More than 250,000 people visited Blessed John Paul II's mortal remains on the day of his beatification.

At the end of the May 1 beatification Mass, Pope Benedict XVI, cardinals and other dignitaries knelt and prayed at the foot of the closed wooden casket; many kissed and caressed the recently cleaned and polished wood.

Once the dignitaries left, a thick velvet rope was put around the casket and the public was allowed to stream up the right side and down the left side of St. Peter's Basilica. The pilgrim path was marked by waist-high wooden barricades set back several feet from the casket.

Ushers kept the crowds moving swiftly, leaving many with little time to linger. Small groups of people were allowed to kneel briefly in prayer far from the barricades.

Moving the crowds so quickly meant many pilgrims who were in the square after the beatification only had to wait 30 minutes to get in to see the casket.

Sister Milena, a member of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth, said she only waited in line for half an hour right after the beatification Mass.

The 24-year-old nun from Wroclaw, Poland, said it felt "very special, very nice" to be able to pray in front of his casket. She said she prayed for a woman who just joined her religious order.

A man from Scotland said he got inside the basilica around 1 a.m. and called the moment "grace-filled."

The Vatican said that within 13 hours May 1-2, some 250,000 people passed by the casket to pay their respects before the basilica closed at 3 a.m. Hundreds of people handed ushers notes and flowers that were set behind the casket.

The public viewing did not resume again until about 1 p.m., May 2, after the Mass of

thanksgiving in St. Peter's Square presided over by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state.

Not long after the Mass, Anthony Stagno from Chicago said he and his wife hadn't braved the long lines yet.

"Maybe this evening," he said, adding that "it was better seeing him alive" which they did in 1997 in Bologna, Italy. "He had fantastic charisma," Stagno said.

Several pilgrims waiting right outside St. Peter's Square said May 2 they did not plan on going into the basilica because the line was too long.

"We've had enough lines and being pushed," said two women from the Philippines.

Sister Christina, a member of the Servants of Mary from southern Cameroon, said she felt "real joy" and could sense the late pope's presence.

Being by the casket, it felt "like he had never left us," she said.

The Tuscani family from Turin, Italy, said, "it was a moving experience" to have seen his casket.

However, the ushers moved them past so quickly they didn't have time to pray, "just time to make the sign of the cross, which was more than enough," Paola Tuscani said.

Father Enda Naughton, 78, who works at the Knock Shrine, Ireland's national Marian shrine, said he had celebrated Mass with the late pope twice in his private chapel when he was alive.

He said seeing his casket "was lovely" and that his whole visit had been touched by the blessed.

He said when planning the trip last month, all the hotels were full. He prayed to Pope John Paul and asked him that "if he wanted me to come," the Polish pope would have to "do something" and then 10 minutes later he got an email from one hotel saying there had been a cancellation.

He said he was lucky to get into the basilica because “there was a queue miles long, snaking around. It would have taken hours.”

But he was accompanying a woman with a disability and they were given permission to go to the front of the line to see the casket, he said.

The casket was set on a raised platform in front of the main altar on the basilica’s main level. It was surrounded by yellow and white roses and flanked by four Swiss Guards.

Placed on top of the casket was of the “one of the most precious Gospels in the Vatican Library’s holdings,” the illuminated Lorsch Gospels from the medieval era, the Vatican said in a written statement.

The Vatican said there would be a recitation of the rosary before the basilica would be closed the evening of May 2. In a private ceremony after the closure, the casket was to be moved to a new tomb site in the Chapel of St. Sebastian, not far from the basilica’s entrance.