

# Pope John Paul II beatification strikes special chord among Romans

VATICAN CITY - With more than a million people expected to descend on Rome for Pope John Paul II's beatification May 1, the event is being described as yet another pilgrim "invasion" of the Eternal City.

Because the beatification falls on a public holiday, some have predicted a massive exodus by Rome residents eager to escape the logistical problems caused by such a big crowd.

But church officials say that Romans, in fact, may represent the biggest group at the beatification, for a very good reason: For them, Pope John Paul was not only a pope but also a pastor.

The late pope took the title "bishop of Rome" seriously, visiting the city's parishes, prisons, schools, hospitals and soup kitchens. He even held an annual audience with Rome's garbage collectors.

"John Paul II managed to get close to the Roman people, and he's still very much present in their minds. Even Romans who were not great believers were touched by him," said Giancarlo Distanto, who works in a bookstore near the Vatican.

"Sure, it's tempting to escape the city May 1. But I think the joy of seeing this man beatified is going to keep a lot of people here," Distanto said.

The Diocese of Rome has even organized its own special event, a prayer vigil the night before the beatification, which will take place in the open area that was once the ancient Circus Maximus. Hundreds of thousands are expected to attend.

When Pope John Paul II was elected in 1978, Romans flocked to St. Peter's Square and were shocked to hear that a certain "Karol Wojtyla" would be the new pontiff - the first non-Italian pope in more than 450 years. But the new pope quickly won the

crowd over when he gave his first speech in Italian and invited people to correct him if he made any linguistic mistakes.

The Polish pope worked hard to build bridges in Rome, carrying on with the pastoral work that he had enjoyed so much as archbishop of Krakow. In an effort to better know his flock, he visited more than 300 of Rome's 334 parishes, providing every Roman neighborhood with moments of celebration and excitement.

Those visits were not limited to a papal Mass. Typically, the pope met with parish groups, chatted with young people and toured the facilities. Romans had the sense that this pope had come to learn about them as well as preach to them.

Pope John Paul met routinely with Rome city officials, and he did not hesitate to weigh in on social and moral problems. He often did so from places that had rarely, if ever, seen a pope: a Rome prison, for example, where prisoners served at the papal altar, read prayers and sang hymns.

He not only visited Rome's homeless shelters and soup kitchens, but opened a 74-bed hostel for the poor inside the Vatican and, more than once, personally visited with people there.

His annual encounters with the street sweepers and garbage collectors near the Vatican never made headlines, but always gave Romans a sense that this pope stood with the "little people."

In 1998, Pope John Paul personally kicked off a city-wide evangelization campaign, knocking on the door of a fifth-floor apartment in Rome and casually visiting with the family that lived there.

In the neighborhood of Rome's ancient Jewish ghetto, Pope John Paul's photo still hangs in some shops. Residents there say they'll never forget when he made history by visiting their synagogue in 1986.

Even more than with special groups, Pope John Paul made connections with a whole generation of young people in Rome. As pope for more than 26 years, he hosted Roman schoolchildren on dozens of occasions at the Vatican, in encounters that often included song, dance and testimonies by the young. As he grew older and

frailer, these meetings had a special poignancy.

When the pope lay dying, Rome's young people were the first to arrive in St. Peter's Square. They came by the hundreds and then by the thousands, serenading and praying for the pope beneath his window. Eventually they were joined by more than 3 million people who arrived in Rome for the pope's death and funeral.

Romans were proud of themselves in 2005 for absorbing and hosting such a huge crowd with little or no problem. They want to do the same for the beatification, but there are some unusual practical problems.

For one thing, May 1 is Europe's "labor day" holiday, which means a shutdown of most businesses, shops, coffee bars, restaurants and public transportation. Store owners have already petitioned for an exemption from the closure rules, and say if no permission is granted they may open anyway.

"Such a great mass of people cannot arrive here and find a city without services," said Cesare Pambianchi, the president of Rome's Confcommercio retailers' association. "The image of Rome is at stake."