

Rome expecting at least 300,000 pilgrims for John Paul's beatification

ROME - Church and local government organizers are planning to accommodate at least 300,000 people in St. Peter's Square and the surrounding area for Pope John Paul II's beatification Mass May 1.

Monsignor Liberio Andreatta, head of Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi, the Vatican-related pilgrimage agency, told reporters March 29, "Rome is ready to welcome every pilgrim who wants to come. Earlier, newspapers published megalithic numbers and said every hotel is booked. That's not true."

Father Cesare Atuire of Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi said as soon as Pope Benedict XVI announced the beatification date, travel agents and others booked large blocks of hotel rooms. Now that the beatification is just a month away, they have a more precise idea of how many rooms they will need and so they are freeing up the extras.

In addition, he said, two campgrounds outside of Rome will be reserved for pilgrims who want to keep their costs to a minimum. The commuter trains, which usually do not run on weekends, will be on a special schedule to get them to the prayer vigil April 30 in Rome's Circus Maximus and to the Mass the next morning.

Because the pope is the bishop of Rome and the pilgrims will spend most of their time in Rome, not at the Vatican, the Diocese of Rome is responsible for much of the cost of the event, Monsignor Andreatta said.

The diocese is passing the collection basket to large Italian companies to come up with at least \$1.7 million to cover the costs of handling 300,000 pilgrims for the beatification, Monsignor Andreatta said.

Although the city of Rome and its hotels, restaurants and shops will benefit financially from the pilgrims, Monsignor Andreatta said the financial crisis still weighing on Italy made the diocese look to donors instead of the local government

for funding.

The money will cover building a stage and installing a sound system and lighting at the Circus Maximus, running extra buses, covering the cost of the bus and subway tickets included in the pilgrim's package, renting and erecting crowd-control barriers and renting dozens of large video screens.

The screens will be placed in the squares around the Vatican and in most of the churches in the historic center of Rome so that people who cannot get close to St. Peter's Square or would prefer to stay away from the crowds can still follow the Mass, he said.

An Italian beverage company has donated 1 million bottles of mineral water, he said, and a restaurant chain has donated the ingredients for thousands of box lunches.

Father Atuire said that as of March 29, the largest numbers of pilgrims were coming from Italy, then Pope John Paul's native Poland, followed by Spain and the United States.

Opera Romano Pellegrinaggi has launched a special website - jpiibeatus.org - to assist pilgrims with reservations and information. The information is available in five languages, including English.