

Rome, world prepare for beatification of Pope John Paul II

VATICAN CITY - As the countdown continued for the beatification of Pope John Paul II, church and civil authorities put the finishing touches on logistical plans to handle potentially massive crowds at the main events in Rome.

Meanwhile, Vatican officials were heartened at the massive response to online projects designed to make the beatification a universal experience.

Pope Benedict XVI will celebrate the beatification Mass in St. Peter's Square May 1. Because no tickets are being handed out for the liturgy, no one really knows how many people to expect. Estimates range from 300,000 to 1.5 million, and crowd control barriers will be set up for blocks around the Vatican.

Immediately after Mass, the faithful can pray before Pope John Paul's unopened casket, which will be set in front of the main altar in St. Peter's Basilica. The veneration is expected to continue most of the day.

A large crowd is also expected for the prayer vigil April 30 at the site of Rome's ancient Circus Maximus racetrack, where Pope Benedict will make a video appearance. Rome church officials have organized that event to underline the strong connection between the Polish pope and the Diocese of Rome.

The French nun whose healing was accepted as the miracle needed for Pope John Paul's beatification will share her story with pilgrims at the prayer vigil. Sister Marie-Simon-Pierre, a member of the Little Sisters of the Catholic Motherhood, had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and believes she was cured in 2005 through the intercession of the late pope.

The morning after the beatification, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state, will celebrate a Mass of thanksgiving in St. Peter's Square. That liturgy, too, is expected to attract tens of thousands of people.

While the size of the crowds remained a mystery, Vatican officials said their online initiatives had already taken the beatification to groups and individuals around the world. For example, the Vatican's special beatification Facebook page at www.facebook.com/vatican.johnpaul2 has had more than 6 million visits and has gained nearly 50,000 followers.

Similar pages have been opened at the www.pope2you.net site aimed at younger audiences and on the Vatican's YouTube channel. They offer photos, tributes, key quotes and video highlights of Pope John Paul's pontificate. The beatification events will be live-streamed at many of the sites, ensuring worldwide participation.

"Six years have passed since John Paul's funeral, and the world of communications has changed greatly, with many more online opportunities available to the church," said Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, who was coordinating several of the Internet efforts.

"Moreover, John Paul II was much loved by the younger generations who use the new media. He is a figure who adapts well to the Web, because he left us with a wealth of images and spoken words that one is happy to see and listen to again in their original context," he said.

The Diocese of Rome has also launched a multilingual beatification website that offers the diocesan-approved prayer asking for graces of Pope John Paul in 31 languages, including Chinese, Arabic, Russian and Swahili.

The beatification date was chosen carefully. May 1 is Divine Mercy Sunday, a day with special significance for Pope John Paul, who made it a church-wide feast day to

be celebrated a week after Easter. The pope died April 2, 2005, the vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday.

May 1 is also Europe's "labor day" holiday, which meant the beatification events would not disrupt the normal business of Rome. Many Romans were planning to leave the city for the weekend, although church leaders said Italians would still be the biggest national group attending the beatification. Poles were expected to be the second-largest group, followed by pilgrims from Spain and the United States.

The Vatican has used the run-up to the beatification as a teaching moment about the sainthood process, emphasizing that Pope John Paul will be declared "blessed" not for his achievements as pope but for the way he lived the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love.

Church officials have announced that in the Diocese of Rome, where Pope John Paul served as bishop, and in all the dioceses of his native Poland, his feast day is to be inserted automatically into the annual calendar. Oct. 22 was chosen as the day to remember him because it is the anniversary of the liturgical inauguration of his papacy in 1978.

Other places can petition the Vatican to insert the Oct. 22 feast day into their liturgical calendar. Likewise, parishes and churches can be named after "Blessed Pope John Paul" in Rome and Poland, with other requests considered on a case-by-case basis.

Throughout the universal church, Catholics will have a year to celebrate a Mass in thanksgiving for the pope's beatification.

The Vatican has published the text of the opening prayer - formally the "collect" - for his feast day Mass. The English text reads: "O God, who are rich in mercy and who willed that the Blessed John Paul II should preside as pope over your universal

church, grant, we pray, that, instructed by his teaching, we may open our hearts to the saving grace of Christ, the sole redeemer of mankind. Who lives and reigns.”

Following the beatification ceremonies, Pope John Paul’s casket will be relocated to the Chapel of St. Sebastian in the upper level of St. Peter’s Basilica. He had been buried in the grotto beneath St. Peter’s, but the new resting place is more easily accessible to the steady stream of pilgrims who come to see the pope’s tomb.

Not long after Pope John Paul’s death, Pope Benedict set him on the fast track to beatification by waiving the normal five-year waiting period for the introduction of his sainthood cause. Even so, church experts needed years to review the massive amount of evidence regarding the late pope, including thousands of pages of writings and speeches.

More than 120 witnesses were interviewed, and studies were conducted on Pope John Paul’s ministry, the way he handled suffering and how he faced his death. The Vatican took special care evaluating the reported miracle in France, and Vatican officials emphasized that no procedural shortcuts were taken. The process was completed relatively quickly: six years and one month from death to beatification is a modern record in the church.