

ASIA Mainland Chinese Catholics In Manila Hail Opening Ceremony Of Olympics

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MANILA (UCAN) -- Church people from mainland Chinese now studying in Manila say the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics they saw on television showcased Chinese culture to the world and highlighted China's development.

The students, mainly priests, nuns and seminarians, told UCA News they organized special gatherings to watch the four-hour-long event on Aug. 8.

At Jesuit-run East Asian Pastoral Institute, about a dozen of them made and ate traditional Chinese dumplings before their viewing began. The dumplings, a favourite among northern Chinese but also popular elsewhere China, are a common feature for celebrations of major Chinese feasts such as the Lunar New Year and mid-autumn festival.

A seminarian surnamed Zhao told UCA News on Aug. 10 that as they enjoyed that meal, they speculated on whether Li Ning, China's gymnastics medallist in the 1984, would be the one selected to light the Olympic cauldron.

"When Li appeared on the screen" to light the cauldron, "we were overjoyed and we applauded," said Zhao, a native of Hebei province in northern China.

Li, now 44, won six medals at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984, including three gold medals in the floor exercise, pommel horse and rings competition.

Some who shared the TV watching that evening told UCA News how the elaborate opening ceremony has moved them. Zhao, for one, said he was thrilled to see Chinese culture showcased before a vast international audience.

Canadian-Chinese Sister Susie Kua, who joined the gathering, similarly felt that foreigners would be impressed by the extravaganza and appreciate the efforts that went into it. Her own hope, she added, is that foreigners who also viewed the opening would change their stereotyped ideas about China.

However, she admitted, not all foreigners would easily understand some of the more sophisticated cultural segments presented during the ceremony.

A Chinese priest from northern China's Inner Mongolia region told UCA News that the event showed how China has developed since it opened its doors to the world since 1979. In his view, the spectacular ceremony has aroused the pride and joy of Chinese all over the world.

Seven Chinese seminarians studying at University of Santo Tomas (UST), however, had to make do with watching a repeat telecast of the opening later on because the event coincided with their two-day monthly retreat.

One of those seminarians, John, told UCA News they had told the rector of the UST Central Seminary where they stay that they "did not want to miss the show," but their request was turned down and they had to see a repeat telecast on the Internet the next day. Even so, "I could feel the atmosphere," said John. "It aroused my patriotic sentiments."

He said he also received mobile text messages from Filipinos and friends of other nationalities, congratulating him on China's successful Olympics opening ceremony. John said one friend wrote: "Congratulations China! Spectacular and amazing Olympic Games opening! Bravo!"

At San Carlos Seminary in Makati City, south of Manila, seven seminarians from mainland China joined a seminarian from Taiwan and 20 others from the Philippines to watch the opening. Chinese Catholic students elsewhere also saw the live broadcast and met that evening in small gatherings to celebrate.

Among the mainland Catholics who spoke to UCA News, some said that watching the event reminded them of their hometowns and this made them feel homesick.

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CHINA

The false images of the Beijing Olympics

by Bernardo Cervellera

The hoax of the little girl lip-synching the song at the opening ceremony of the Games is only one of the many deceptions of these Olympics, which favor image over reality, in order to cover up the environmental and human disasters created by the ruling communist

party. The intention is to eliminate the individual and the people, and in order to do this, religious freedom is denied. The advice of Benedict XVI.

Beijing (AsiaNews) - Lin Miaoke, the girl who sang the hymn to the motherland at the opening ceremony for the Beijing Games, only mouthed the words to the song. Chen Qigang, the musical director for the ceremony, says that little Lin's only contribution was her image. The voice was that of another girl, Yang Peiyi, with a more beautiful voice but with imperfect teeth and a less charming face. Chinese blogs are accusing the organizers of the ceremony of preferring image over content, and are asking what could possibly be objectionable about the simple face of a seven-year-old girl, who not only sings but also paints and loves the Beijing opera. Chen Qigang emphasizes that the choice of image over content was made for the sake of "national interests".

Another revelation - confirmed by the Olympic organizing committee - is that the fireworks displays seen on television all over the city were not real, but were generated by computers. The illusion was necessary because on the evening of August 8, the Beijing sky was cloudy and hazy - because of the pollution and heat - and visibility was poor.

In order to avoid embarrassing questions about pollution, in this case as well - again, out of "national interest" - the preference was to deal with image rather than substance.

None of this is surprising. China has used the entire spectacle of the Olympics to promote an image of a modern, open, joyful, clean, young country, possibly in order to attract new investments and tourists, and seeking to dismiss problems and contradictions that nonetheless remain pressing for the population.

The environment

Remaining with the opening ceremony, the device of the children drawing the sun (rarely seen in Beijing) or the white clouds (also rare) is at odds with the concrete situation in present-day China. According to a recent survey, more than 90% of Chinese say that the environmental emergency is the most serious problem facing the country, creating a lack of drinking water in cities and in the countryside, and killing at least 400,000 people a year through respiratory problems.

During these days, foreign visitors are being bombarded with television images of a tourist's paradise, in Zhejiang or Sichuan, with peaceful blue lakes, green forests, playful pandas, while the reality is one of industries that are polluting entire

earthquake-stricken regions at risk of disease and nuclear contamination.
Culture

A similar image-polishing operation is taking place in the area of culture. There is no television broadcast or daily paper without its features on ancient Chinese culture: calligraphy, music, opera, ritual, celebration, tradition . . . But all of this is explained as "things" to be done. Rituals, foods, traditions are presented without any deep exploration of the factors that brought them about. All that is given are "instructions for use" (today we're eating dumplings; today we're eating noodles, today we're eating this vegetable . . .) without ever approaching the reason why: why should these things be done today?

The opening ceremony also glorified the Confucian sages, the writing system, the printing press, the silk road, the architecture of the past, and then launched itself toward the future with the spaceship, the hope for a world of brotherhood, without saying anything about a present that is so painful for hundreds of millions of Chinese.

A glaring omission: the communist party

At the opening ceremony, the entire communist period of ideological purism was set aside: the survey of the great moments in Chinese history went from the costumes and red pillars of the Ming and Qing dynasties to the space exploits of Yang Liwei, the first Chinese astronaut.

All of this is due above all to the fact that the communist party in China is suffering through the most profound ideological crisis since its foundation, undermined as it is by corruption and by departure from its "service to the people". But it is also due to the fact that the most criticized - and perhaps most hated - institution in China is the party itself. The tens of thousands of revolts that take place every year - coming closer and closer to unseating the party, to slashing and burning it to the ground, clashing with the police and army because of the expropriations, deceit, pollution, job losses, injustice - tell just how much the people love their party. In order to "improve the image", the ministry of propaganda, preoccupied by this trend, has said it is ready to pay 5 maos (5 euro cents) to anyone who includes words of praise for the party on his internet blog. At the opening ceremony, because of questions of "image", there was no reference at all to Mao - who promoted the disastrous Leap Forward and the bloody Cultural Revolution - or to Deng, who imposed economic modernization without democracy. This avoids making any effort for the "purification memory": by reviewing history in order to confess one's own mistakes.

No room for man or his freedom

What was lacking from any part of the Olympics ceremonies was man and the people. All of the torchbearers were chosen from among figures from the communist party, from business, from entertainment, and from sports. There was no trace of the millions of migrant workers who for years have been exploited in order to construct the pharaonic Olympic facilities; no trace of any of the people of Beijing forced to endure the problems of the Olympics (traffic, safety, difficulty of movement, surveillance . . .) without enjoying any of the advantages.

The people are told to obey: don't spit on the ground, don't shout in the streets, don't express your opinions . . . They're not asked to be involved. The people of Beijing are suffering and struggling with the Olympics, but they're not participating in them. The proof is the many empty seats in the stadiums: the tickets were given to the sponsors, who didn't even take the trouble to hand them out. The only important thing is the image, that the sponsor's logo appears on television.

Involvement and participation imply an appeal to personal responsibility. But this is what those in power fear most.

But even the results that China would like to see, like cleaning up the environment, are in danger of slipping away without an emphasis on personal responsibility.

Religious freedom

After the criticism from the international media on China's censorship of the internet, religious websites still remain blocked, especially those of Catholics and of the Falun Gong. I think that this is because religion is the path to the rediscovery of the individual, which the Chinese regime is seeking to eliminate. What the regime is offering to young people is nothing more than consumerist materialism: things to possess, wealth to hope for, Chinese power to be expanded, and nothing for the soul. And religion is eliminated. When the pope said a few days ago "it is urgent that China open itself to the Gospel", this was not only a call for religious freedom: it is a necessity for China, in order that the responsibility of the individual be exalted, without which no ideal, not even that of a vibrant market, can ever be fully attained.

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HONG KONG - CHINA

Hong Kong bishop Tong in Beijing for Games, without meeting city's bishop

A visit to the bishop of Beijing was judged as "inconvenient". Beijing must work harder to improve the life of the population, including from the spiritual point of view, beyond the moment of the Olympics.

Hong Kong (AsiaNews) - Bishop John Tong, coadjutor bishop of Hong Kong, says he is content to have attended the opening ceremony for the Olympics, but hopes that the government will above all improve the daily lives of the Chinese, beyond the most prominent events; and he is disappointed not to have had the chance to meet the bishop of Beijing. His request met with the reply that the encounter would be "inconvenient".

Bishop John Tong Hon, 69, is one of the many religious authorities who were invited to attend the solemn opening ceremony at the "Bird's Nest" stadium last August 8. The invitation was issued by the office for relations between Hong Kong and China, a sort of Chinese consulate in the territory, but also involved the office of religious affairs in Beijing.

Bishop Tong tells AsiaNews that "I wanted to take the opportunity to meet for the first time the archbishop of Beijing, Joseph Li Shan. I asked a few priests - who had studied theology in Hong Kong - if I could do this, but after some research, they replied that it would be 'inconvenient' to visit him, and that they hoped 'I would understand'. Despite this, I was at least able to greet him by telephone, although - out of fear that the line was being monitored - our conversation was a bit generic. I told him that we support him and pray for his diocese. Through those priests, I sent him a gift of two vestments for the Eucharistic celebration, as a sign of fraternity".

For Bishop Tong, "the [opening] ceremony was very beautiful, and we should congratulate the Chinese government for preparing all of this in such a solemn manner". But he adds: "as I have said a number of times, I hope that the government will make even greater efforts in other areas, because life is not just sports, medals, fanfare, material success. The people are looking for something more, they are looking for spiritual values". The coadjutor bishop of Hong Kong also points out the widespread poverty that characterizes Beijing beyond the Olympic Village. "All of these efforts [for the opening ceremony] must be addressed to values and realities more important than the glory of a moment".

Bishop Tong arrived in the Chinese capital on the morning of August

8, and had to depart the following day. The hotel reserved for him by the organization was the New Millennium, opened just a few months ago for the Games. The price is about 2,300 Hong Kong dollars (about 230 euros per night, which each guest had to pay out of his own pocket). But the hotel accepts guests only for a minimum of two nights. So Bishop Tong had to find his own accommodations, which were offered to him by a Catholic from Hong Kong who has a house in Beijing, a few minutes from the "Bird's Nest".

Various observers have seen the invitation issued to the coadjutor bishop of Hong Kong (but not to Cardinal Zen, the ordinary of the city) as a positive sign in relations between China and the Vatican. Bishop Tong comments briefly: the Vatican, he says, expressed all of its "good will" toward China, and "the ball is now in China's court".

In recent days, the pope expressed his best wishes for the Beijing Games. On the occasion of a visit to the birthplace of the missionary Saint Josef Freinademetz last August 5, he said: "China is becoming increasingly important in political, economic, and intellectual life. It is important", he added, "that this great country should open itself to the Gospel. Saint Josef Freinademetz shows us that faith is not an alienation for any culture or any people, because all cultures are waiting for Christ, and are not destroyed by the Lord, but rather come to their maturity".

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CHINA Hong Kong and Macau Bishops Attend Beijing Olympics' Opening Ceremony

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HONG KONG (UCAN) -- Bishops from Hong Kong and Macau who attended the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics have praised the event, acknowledging the "cheerful atmosphere" as well as China's openness to the outside world.

The Chinese government invited Coadjutor Bishop John Tong Hon of Hong Kong and Bishop Jose Lai Hung-seng of Macau to come to the Aug. 8 event in Beijing.

Bishop Tong, 69, arrived in the capital that day, while Bishop Lai, 62, went a day earlier as part of a delegation led by Macau Chief Executive Edmund Ho Hau-wah to witness the opening of the relocated Macau government office.

Bishop Lai told UCA News on Aug. 11 that he did not visit any Beijing

church or clergy during his three-day visit in Beijing due to time constraints.

Both prelates said they sensed a "cheerful atmosphere" at the National Stadium, popularly called the "Bird's Nest." They also noted that China used many resources during the opening to help foreigners understand China better.

Still, Bishop Tong said, some segments depicting the history and development of Chinese culture "may have been too abstract" for people who know little of Chinese history. More explanations would have been helpful, he remarked.

Recalling the good wishes Pope Benedict XVI expressed on Aug. 3 for the Olympics, Bishop Lai said it was "a good thing" to represent the Church at the ceremony and to witness China's openness to the outside world through an event expressing "friendship and cultural exchange."

Bishop Tong told UCA News on Aug. 11 he expressed a wish to meet Vatican-approved Bishop Joseph Li Shan of Beijing, who had been ordained in September 2007. He also said he was informed he would be "welcome to stay" at Beijing Seminary. However, he was later informed both prospects were "inconvenient."

"As a priest, I had hoped to stay at a seminary, and to pay my first visit to Bishop Li," said Bishop Tong, one of several Hong Kong religious leaders invited to the opening ceremony. "Though we could not meet, I sent Bishop Li my warmest regards in the Lord."

Even so, Bishop Tong, who last visited Beijing in 2004, said he was happy that his two-day visit to Beijing gave him a chance to meet two Beijing priests who previously studied at the Hong Kong seminary.

The bishop, a Church-in-China expert, also commented on the possible impact his and the Macau bishop's visit would have on China-Vatican relations. The Vatican has already expressed its "goodwill" toward China, and "the ball is now in China's court," he said.

Bishop Tong added that he prays China will be more open after the Games and is glad to have seen religious leaders present for the opening ceremony. Nonetheless, he said he regrets that Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun of Hong Kong was not invited because more dialogue would enhance harmony and understanding.

Despite reports of recent violent incidents in China, Bishop Tong said he was not worried because police are guarding the roads and, besides, he leaves such things to God.

The Macau delegation included legislators, key officials and representatives from social sectors. It was Bishop Lai's second visit to Beijing since 2005, two years after he was appointed to lead his diocese.

Bishop Lai said the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) hosted a lunch for religious leaders from Hong Kong and Macau on Aug. 8. SARA vice director Jiang Jianyong and two officials, he said, were at the "courtesy reception" and no special topic was discussed. Bishop Tong did not attend.

At 5 p.m. that day, both bishops and other Hong Kong and Macau guests went to the National Stadium where they had to wait more than two hours to undergo a security check. Bishop Tong added that it was a long walk to their seats.

Some religious leaders brought along biscuits to eat before the 8 p.m. show began. Bottled water was provided in a souvenir kit for each. The gala ended after midnight, and it then took two hours for guests to leave the stadium.

Asked if he would attend any of the Olympic equestrian games being staged in Hong Kong, Bishop Tong said he had little interest and did not want to spend hours queuing for security checks.

Both prelates have been members of the Vatican's Commission for the Church in China since January 2007.

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Editorial - Commentary

Beijing Olympics bring hope for new destinies

The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win, but to take part ... not to have conquered, but to have fought well," said the founder of the Modern Olympic Movement.

However, the Olympic spirit moves far beyond the physical struggle. It places sport at the service of harmonious development of relationships among the people of the world, the arena within which politicians speak and prophets preach. China has made a deliberate decision to enter that world.

Its choice to run that course has opened it to the scrutiny of the world as never before. It realises, as St. Paul did, that “though all the runners in the stadium take part in the race, only one of them gets a prize” (1 Corinthians 9:24). However, it will not be content with what the missionary apostle described as the temporary glory of a laurel wreath that will quickly wither. Although maybe not the eternal reward that St. Paul speaks of, China is chasing a more enduring goal.

In staging the Olympic Games, it is arguably fulfilling an ambition articulated by the first head of the State Physical Education and Sports Commission, He Long, in the early days of the newly-created People’s Republic of China.

Encouraging his nation to overcome its reputation as the poor relation of Asia, He nominated sport as the most probable way of achieving this, saying, “Sport could undertake this arduous and glorious task.”

China has long prided itself on its ability to control its own destiny. However, the very act of bidding for the Olympic Games was an indication of a desire to be part of the international community in a new way, a recognition of the interdependence of nations in the forming of harmonious relations across the world.

Although China may be hosting the 2008 Olympic Games, it does not own them. They belong to the world and have established values that cannot be idly cast aside. Without doubt, the struggles during these games will not all be fought out in the sporting arena.

However, the Olympic dream that something more than the glitter of gold, silver and bronze can be achieved at the Beijing Olympics is alive. The run up to previous games has also been marred by tensions over human rights and it is worth an over-the-shoulder glance at the progress at least one of those host countries.

Prior to the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, voices of discontent were still being silenced as the government steamrolled its agendas. Just 20

years later, officials in the same country recently backed off in the face of demonstrators, who poured into the streets demanding an end to the import of beef, fed on genetically modified products.

This has not been the glorious year of Olympic fever that China had anticipated. The big freeze of the Lunar New Year and the devastating earthquakes in Sichuan province were unexpected, but another face of China was revealed.

The Olympic Games is a world event. Blessings will be reaped according to the goodwill of all who take part, not only the hosts.

Hong Kong Sunday Examiner
Sunday 10 August 2008

Prayer for the Olympic Games

Almighty God and Father, you created men and women with the nobility of human nature and the physical ability to accomplish many things.

It is your wish that human beings grow and develop physical skill, as your son, Jesus, did, gaining favour before you and before humankind.

In this Olympic Games, we will be witnesses to the strength, potential and skill that you have bestowed upon the human body. Help us to appreciate the wonder of your creation through the wonder of the excellence of athletic performance.

Father, protect all the athletes during the Games. Make them aware of their dignity as competitors, help them to compete in the true spirit of the Olympics; the love of sport and the spirit of fairness. Help them to value the personal fulfillment in their performance, beyond what can be measured by the winning of medals.

Father, during the Games, you gather people of all nations as a single Olympic community. Foster the spirit of mutual appreciation among them, help them to learn from one another. May amazing exchanges take place across the boundaries of culture, language and social systems.

Help us to see sport as a common language, competition as a means of mutual encouragement and communication, and to appreciate the value

of a medal as a collective human achievement. Father, help us to understand that the shared dream of our world is for the crooked to stand straight, the weak to be strengthened, the oppressed freed and the poor have a share in the common wealth.

Father, we believe that the sports stadium is not a battlefield. Sport is not a place to vent hatred or play out political agendas. Sport is an instinct, engraved in the human imagination by you, our creator, to remind us that struggle is part of our lives and that the ultimate race is the one to eternal glory.

Father, we join together as your children, as a people of good will to await the manifestation of your justice in the equality of the Olympic spirit. May all the athletes and citizens of the world engage in this great event with your blessing, with a freedom of spirit, full of peace and joy.

You are the almighty Father, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

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VATICAN 'It Is Important That China Open To The Gospel,' Pope Says

By Gerard O'Connell, Special Correspondent in Rome
August 7, 2008 | ZY05512.1509

ROME (UCAN) -- Four days before the opening of the Olympic Games, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted his hope for China to welcome the Good News when he visited the birthplace of an Italian missionary who died in the mainland almost 100 years ago.

"We know that China is becoming ever more important in political and economic life, and in the life of ideas. It is important that this great country open to the Gospel," the scholar-pope said on Aug. 5. Observers interpreted his remarks as a passionate call for full religious freedom in the mainland, and for China to open fully to Christianity and understand it has nothing to fear from the religion.

The pope had already mentioned China earlier in the week. On Sunday Aug. 3, speaking from a prepared text, he publicly conveyed his good wishes to China and all involved in the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, due to open on Aug. 8.

On Tuesday evening he touched on the sensitive subject of religion in China. On this occasion he spoke without a prepared text, although

the daily Italian-language L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, ran the story on the front page of its Aug. 7 edition.

Pope Benedict recognizes China allows a degree of religious freedom, but within limits. He wants to assuage any fears or concerns Chinese authorities have and help them understand how the Gospel can engage in a full and honest dialogue with Chinese culture, and not cause alienation.

The pope pointed to Saint Joseph Freinademetz (1852-1909), who preached the Gospel in China for 29 years, as an example of how Christianity can truly integrate with all that is good in Chinese culture.

He spoke after visiting the house where the saint was born in Oies, a tiny mountain village in northeastern Italy's Val Badia region. The house attracts pilgrims, many from China, but Pope Benedict made his remarks in the village's new church, which resembles a Chinese pagoda.

The saint joined the newly founded Society of the Divine Word in 1879, after being ordained a diocesan priest 14 years earlier. He served in Hong Kong 1879-1881 and then preached in southern Shandong province, eastern China, for 27 years. He survived the anti-foreigner violence of the Boxer revolt, but died of typhoid in 1908 in Daijiazhuang and was buried there. Pope John Paul II canonized him in 2003.

Pope Benedict called the missionary a sign for the future of the Church and told the crowd in the church, "He is a saint of utmost relevance today."

Elaborating, the Holy Father said: "Saint Joseph Freinademetz shows us that the faith is not an alienation for any culture, for any people, because all cultures await Christ and are not destroyed by the Lord; rather, they reach their maturity (in him)."

Portraits of the saint and historical accounts testify to how much he sought to identify with the Chinese people. He grew a pointed beard and dressed in clothing typical of the time and place. After arriving in China, he never returned home.

"Saint Joseph Freinademetz wanted not only to live and die as a Chinese, but also to remain Chinese in heaven," the pope said. "In this way he ideally identified himself with this people, in the certainty that it would open to faith in Jesus Christ."

Pope Benedict invited the congregation to pray for the saint's encouragement "to go towards Christ, because he alone can unite peoples, only he can unite cultures." He added, "Let us pray too that he may give courage to many young people to dedicate their lives totally to the Lord and to his Gospel."

The village where the saint once lived has only 15 inhabitants today, but 5,000 pilgrims greeted the pope when he arrived by helicopter from the seminary in nearby Bressanone, where he is vacationing.

The visitors' book inside the saint's former house bears the names of many Chinese who came to honor the missionary called Fu Shenfu (priest of happiness), including Divine Word Cardinal Thomas Tien Keng-hsin, the first Chinese cardinal, from 1963.

Pope Benedict added: "May the Lord, through the intercession of Saint Josef Freinademetz, grant many spiritual vocations and open China ever more to faith in Jesus."

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CHINA Beijing Parishes Getting Ready To Receive Foreign Visitors During Olympic Season

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BEIJING (UCAN) -- Church personnel and volunteers here have received training in hospitality and security concerns to prepare them to welcome foreign athletes and visitors during the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, due to begin on Aug. 8.

All 20 churches in the capital, the major seminary and the Beijing diocese convent will be open as usual in the daytime for all visitors, Father Matthew Zhen Xuebin, diocesan chancellor, told UCA News on Aug. 5.

He said lay volunteers have been trained for reception and ensuring safety at the churches. Olympics events are scheduled Aug. 8-24.

A Beijing priest who requested anonymity told UCA News in late July, "Everything is ready basically, and the final issue is security." He said churches have to guard against fire, burglaries and blasts and other terrorist activities. Government warnings that secessionists from the Tibet and Xinjiang regions might seek to cause disturbances prompted concerns about terrorism.

In mid-July, all parish priests and Catholic volunteers in Beijing joined workers of other religions to practice terrorist prevention at a local mosque.

Drills for local Catholics in firefighting and first aid for heatstroke were held in two churches under the supervision of government officials, the priest added.

Father Zhen told UCA News on Aug. 5 that Beijing diocese has not raised its security level despite reports that a grenade attack in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, northwestern China, the previous day killed 16 police and injured 16 other people in Kashi City.

Beijing diocese's Tianguang (heavenly light) website reported that during a training in July, Bishop Joseph Li Shan of Beijing directed all parishes to pay attention to the image of priests, reception of visitors, safety, sanitation and other duties.

Massgoers and church visitors who bring large bags or luggage already are requested to hand them over for safekeeping before entering a church, the priest who requested anonymity said, and "all parishes must report to the diocese about the situation every evening."

Church workers and volunteers will receive all visitors equally, he said. But in the case of special figures, such as famous athletes or state leaders or envoys, the diocese will send personnel to accompany them to church in a low-key manner and avoid commotion, if they notify the diocese in advance.

Five downtown churches -- Immaculate Conception Cathedral (South Church), Savior Church (North Church), St. Joseph's Church (East Church), Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church (West Church) and St. Michael's Church in Dongjiaomin Lane -- are larger with longer histories, and are expected to attract the most visitors.

After six months' practice, lay volunteers reportedly can greet and have simple conversations, as well as introduce their parishes and the history and current situation of Beijing diocese, in English.

According to the priest, "There is no particular restriction on what we must not say" to visitors, and volunteers were told in the training to "talk about positive aspects of the Church and the country, but that they must honestly answer visitors' questions."

Currently the cathedral has two English Sunday Masses at 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. to serve the needs of foreign Catholics.

According to Father Zhen, who is in charge of foreign affairs for the diocese, the expected large number of visitors has prompted embassies in Beijing to request use of the downtown churches to say Sunday Masses in French, German, Italian and Spanish. Beijing-based foreign

priests will preside over these Masses, which normally are held in the embassies on Sundays.

Free copies of a Chinese-English New Testament have been placed in all churches, he noted.

Concerning the visits of Bishop Jose Lai Hung-seng of Macau and Coadjutor Bishop John Tong Hon of Hong Kong for the Olympics opening, however, Father Zhen said he has not heard or received notice about their visits, and the diocese has made no arrangement for them to meet Bishop Li or other priests.

A team of 17 Catholic volunteers -- priests, nuns and seminarians from Beijing diocese who speak foreign languages -- is serving at the religious service center in the Olympic Village on a 24-hour basis until Sept. 20, Father Zhen said.

The opening ceremony for the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games will begin at 8:08 p.m. on Aug. 8 at the National Stadium.

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