

365 churches in 365 days: On a mission for God

A Chicago pilgrim is blogging his way around the world promoting the ties that unite all Catholics

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On Good Friday, **David Heimann** mourned the death of Jesus Christ in the presence of the pope. And for the first time Sunday, he will be able to celebrate the resurrection of Christ in St. Peter's Basilica.

But Rome was not his only destination on this pilgrimage.

Heimann, of Rogers Park, has traversed the back alleys of Beijing where Chinese Catholics largely worship in secret; visited the cathedral of Las Vegas, where gamblers seek forgiveness; and wandered the ruins of sanctuaries that have suffered the trials of time or persecution.

By year's end, the 32-year-old former youth minister plans to visit at least 365 churches in just as many days, spanning 35 countries and five continents. He is chronicling each step of his journey on his blog, www.adsodalitatem.org (the Latin means "toward solidarity"), and linking satellite images of the churches he sees.

In an era when so much attention is paid to issues that divide parishioners, such as abortion, Heimann prefers to focus on the indisputable ties that bind the Catholic Church in an increasingly secular world.

"It means more than right for life for the unborn," Heimann said recently from somewhere between Oklahoma and Arizona. "Solidarity means when one member of the body suffers we all suffer. When one rejoices we all rejoice. That means I have to be concerned about my experience with genocide in Rwanda. I have to be concerned about the suppression of innocent Christians in China or Vietnam."

Heimann exemplifies the freedom embraced by the John Paul II generation -- young Catholics who have known nothing but the empowerment of the Second Vatican Council and have adopted high-tech ways of spreading the gospel. His electronic epistles join a

growing list of blogs and Web sites powered by ordinary people who believe information is the way to stay connected and strong.

"People are called in extremely singular ways by God," said Heimann's spiritual director, Rev. John Haughey, a Jesuit priest who now works as a senior research fellow at Georgetown University's Woodstock Theological Center. "Vatican II was a vehicle that freed up people's understanding of how God is at work in them. It's more in the world for the sake of the world. So younger Catholics kind of expect to have their eyes opened and their horizons widened by God's movement in them."

Two years ago at Loyola University, Heimann dreamed one night of following in the footsteps of St. Ignatius by making a pilgrimage around the world. Uncertain if the idea was wanderlust or a call from God, Heimann sought advice from Haughey, who counseled him to be patient.

"We're all full of insights and insights have to be tested," Haughey said. "You test the spirit, it says in the Scriptures, even when the inspiration seems to come from someone else or outside you. You test these movements of the heart or insights, usually giving them time to be examined, to see whether they answer the questions that common sense brings up or God clarifies or intelligence verifies."

After finishing his master's in divinity at Loyola University, Heimann worked as a youth minister at St. Ignatius Parish in Rogers Park. But Heimann could not shake the dream, and Haughey encouraged him to go forth.

Heimann formed a non-profit group called Ad Sodalitatem, solicited donations and sought the blessing of Cardinal Francis George, who gave him a letter of introduction should he encounter obstacles on his travels. George called Heimann's intentions of promoting a worldwide understanding "honest and noble."

Heimann's travel itinerary corresponds with milestones around the world. He celebrated the Chinese New Year in Beijing and is spending Holy Week in Rome. His plans have him in Jerusalem by Pentecost on May 27 and in Mexico by December for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

It hasn't been easy. Feeling exhausted, he has taken breaks from blogging, such as during Holy Week. He admits that while in Rome, he contemplated heading home.

"God and I had words last night," Heimann said Friday. "What is he doing with me? Why am I on this?" But he also dined with a priest from Rwanda who helped answer those prayers and inspired him to go on.

Heimann said he has received Communion inside grand Gothic cathedrals, Romanesque basilicas and a cinder-block box with stained-glass windows. He also has worked in soup kitchens and classrooms.

"The Catholic Church is responding to people in very different experiences, from working class to the well-to-do, even the very, very poor," Heimann said. "Each of those communities is trying to live the gospel in a different way, so their response is different."

While his ministry is grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition, Heimann does have Protestant support. Members of Willow Creek Community Church and other churches have made pledges to fund the pilgrimage, budgeted at \$29,000.

"I am humbly amazed that though I tell them I want to visit Catholic churches, they are extremely supportive," he said. "It is hard enough just to live in this world. Who has time to fight over religious differences?"

An American priest who serves the underground Roman Catholic Church in China introduced Heimann to both underground congregations and those sanctioned by the state, which the Vatican does not recognize.

"You can meet sinners and saints on both sides of this division," said the priest, who asked that he not be identified in order to stay in the country.

"We foreigners can offer our hope and prayers that the division in the church can be healed without taking sides and saying: You are right and you are wrong. I hope David sees a church that although it has suffered much persecution, has a vision of hope for the future."

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