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Vatican, Rome gear up for canonizations of John XXIII, John Paul II

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — Just over five weeks before the canonizations of Blessed John XXIII and John Paul II, Rome hotels are reporting they are almost fully booked and the Vatican has confirmed the Mass will take place in St. Peter's Square, despite knowing that hundreds of thousands of people will have to watch the ceremony on large video screens.

Pope Francis had announced in late September that he would proclaim the two popes saints in a single ceremony April 27, Divine Mercy Sunday.

Less than two weeks after the date was announced, the Prefecture of the Papal Household issued an advisory that access to St. Peter's Square would be first-come, first-served and warned pilgrims that unscrupulous tour operators already were trying to sell fake tickets to the Mass.

With perhaps more than 1 million people expected to try to attend the liturgy, rumors abounded that the Vatican would move the ceremony to a wide-open space on the outskirts of town. But the Vatican confirmed Feb. 27 that the Mass would be held in St. Peter's Square, just outside the basilica where the mortal remains of the two rest.

John Paul, known as a globetrotter who made 104 trips outside Italy, served as pope from 1978 to 2005 and was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI on Divine Mercy Sunday, May 1, 2011. Blessed John XXIII, known particularly for convoking the Second Vatican Council, was pope from 1958 to 1963; Pope John Paul beatified him in 2000.

In July, Pope Francis signed a decree recognizing the healing of a Costa Rican woman with a life-threatening brain aneurysm as the miracle needed for Blessed John Paul's canonization. The same day, the

Vatican announced that the pope had agreed with members of the Congregation for Saints' Causes that the canonization of Blessed John should go forward even without a second miracle attributed to his intercession.

A first miracle is needed for beatification. In John Paul's cause, the miracle involved a French nun suffering from Parkinson's disease, the same disease the pope had. In the cause of John, the Vatican recognized as a miracle the healing of an Italian nun who was dying from complications after stomach surgery.

In February, Cardinal Angelo Amato, prefect of the Congregation for Saints' Causes, said Pope Francis did not skip an essential step in approving John's canonization, but "only shortened the time to give the entire church the great opportunity of celebrating 2014 with John XXIII, the initiator of the Second Vatican Council, and John Paul II, who brought to life the pastoral, spiritual and doctrinal inspiration of its documents."

The cardinal said Pope Francis did not dismiss the need for a miracle attributed to the late pope's intercession, but recognized that the "positio" or official position paper prepared for Blessed John's cause, is "full of accounts of miracles" and favors granted by God through his intercession. One case, often mentioned, involves a woman from Naples who accidentally swallowed cyanide; she believes her poison-induced liver damage was miraculously reversed after prayers to John.

Asked by reporters in July to describe the two late popes, Pope Francis said John was "a bit of the 'country priest,' a priest who loves each of the faithful and knows how to care for them; he did this as a bishop and as a nuncio" in Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece and France before becoming a cardinal and patriarch of Venice.

He was holy, patient, had a good sense of humor and, especially by calling the Second Vatican Council, was a man of courage, Pope Francis said. "He was a man who let himself be guided by the Lord."

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As for John Paul, Pope Francis told the reporters on the plane, "I think of him as 'the great missionary of the church' " because he was "a man who proclaimed the Gospel everywhere."

A spokeswoman for the office of Rome's mayor said the city hoped by March 24 to have a working estimate of the number of pilgrims, as well as preliminary plans for transporting them to the Vatican and providing them with water, toilet facilities and first aid stations.

Marco Piscitello, a spokesman for the Rome hotel owners' association, Federalberghi, said by early March, owners were reporting that more than 82 percent of hotel rooms in the city had been booked for the canonization weekend.

"There will be a strong presence in Rome for this double canonization," he said.

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