

The Pope's Travel Agent Makes Sure That All Routes Lead to Rome

• SEPTEMBER 21, 2009

Father Atuire Rolls Out the Red Carpet; Pilgrims Jump the Line to the Sistine Chapel

By [STACY MEICHTRY](#)

VATICAN CITY -- Every week, Pope Benedict XVI addresses pilgrims at St. Peter's Square. The Rev. Cesare Atuire's job is to make sure there are lots of listeners.

Father Atuire, a Ghana-born priest who runs the Holy See's in-house travel agency, pitches full-service, Vatican-style vacations. Mr. Atuire's Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi, or ORP, charts planes, trains, buses and ships to carry packs of tourists to Rome. To crack the U.S. market, Father Atuire recently sent an ORP "missionary" to promote its packages at churches in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey and Florida.

A Visit to the Pope

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A tour group leader holds a sign with the group's bus number on it in St. Peter's Square before the start of an audience with Pope Benedict XVI.

Booking through the ORP has its advantages: Visitors get to jump the line to the Sistine Chapel, attend gatherings with the pope and save money on convents that double as bed-and-breakfasts.

"We can handle anything," says Father Atuire, 42 years old. "You call me up and say: 'I want to bring 10,000 people.' And I say: 'Fine, I'll get back to you in a day.'"

Key to Father Atuire's approach is transforming the world's smallest state into a "transportation hub" like Iceland or London's Heathrow airport, a place people pass through on their way to somewhere else. The ORP offers package holidays that make the Vatican a stop between other religious destinations, such as the Catholic shrines across Europe and in Jerusalem.

Last year, ORP funneled more than 60,000 visitors through the Vatican -- a 40% increase over the year before. And though Pope Benedict has less star power than his globe-trotting predecessor, Pope John Paul II, he is drawing bigger numbers to St. Peter's Square. Last year, 534,500 people attended papal audiences in St. Peter's Square -- exceeding the crowds John Paul II drew in his last years.

Alberto Melloni, a Church historian at the University of Modena, says Pope Benedict is a more reliable attraction because he spends most of his time at home. "The crowds are big because people know the pope is always in Rome. With John Paul, you never knew where in the world he might be."

The ORP was founded in 1934 to organize trips for Vatican officials and groups of Italian Catholics to the Holy Land and other pilgrimage sites. The office shot to prominence after the election of John Paul II in 1978. When John Paul took the papacy on the road, ORP became the primary coordinator of his entourage.



Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi

The Rev. Cesare Atuire, papal travel agent, sends pilgrims to Rome to see Pope Benedict XVI, then on to holy sites.

By the end of the 1990s, however, ORP was facing a crisis. John Paul's health had begun to deteriorate, forcing him to scale back his travels. Violence caused by the 2000 Palestinian uprising known as the Second Intifada, meanwhile, was preventing the ORP from shepherding pilgrims to the Holy Land during the Roman Catholic Jubilee, a year of universal pardon and remission of sins. ORP's traffic to such Holy Land attractions as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem plunged to a mere 750 pilgrims in 2001, as the Intifada continued and the Sept. 11 attacks spooked the airline industry.

In 2005, the Vatican began looking for ways to draw tourists to Rome.

Father Atuire, then a little-known priest in charge of designing the religious activities in ORP travel packages, was appointed managing director in 2005 and promoted to CEO two years later.

His overhaul called for ORP tours to begin in Rome, funneling customers through Vatican City for audiences with the pope before setting off to pilgrimage sites outside Italy.

Father Atuire began to haggle with hotels and brokers for better rates. He used the Vatican's sway to persuade convents and monasteries across Rome to open their doors to cost-conscious pilgrims. ORP is currently advising on renovations to a convent on the outskirts of Rome, where guests will be expected to do their own housekeeping and bus their own tables.

"I negotiate, and I negotiate hard," says the priest, born on the arid plains of northeast Ghana and educated in British schools.

To help tourists get around town, Father Atuire launched a line of hop-on, hop-off double-decker buses. Labeled "Roma Cristiana" and painted yellow and white -- the official colors of the Holy See -- the buses cart tourists from basilica to basilica, with a taped narration.

In 2007, ORP signed a five-year deal with the Italian cargo airline Mistral Air, which is controlled by Italy's postal service. The deal allowed ORP to offer low-cost connecting flights from Rome to popular Catholic destinations, including Lourdes in France, Fatima in Portugal, Santiago de Compostela in Spain and Czestochowa in Poland. The flights include prayers at takeoff, headrests emblazoned with lines from the Bible and, on special occasions, bottles of holy water.

The Rev. Franco Pasquale, 54, recently turned to ORP to book a three-day journey to Rome for his parish on the Mediterranean island of Capri. ORP lined up a charter bus and provided Father Pasquale and his 33 parishioners with a tour guide who was "sensitive to our religious needs," the priest says.

Not everyone relies on ORP to reach the Vatican. The Rev. Notker Baumann had heard of ORP but decided to make his own arrangements in planning a trip to St. Peter's for himself and 52 churchgoers from Germany.

When his group arrived at the Vatican City gates to attend an indoor audience with the pope, Holy See guards turned them away. Standing at the edges of St. Peter's Square, the group unfurled a banner intended for the pope while watching on a giant TV screen as the pontiff greeted other German pilgrims. "What can we do?" Father Baumann says. "It's disappointing. Not for me, but for them."

Now, Father Atuire is setting his sights on 67 million U.S. Catholics. In the fall, he plans to launch an ORP Web site designed to sell packages directly to customers in America.

"At least 60 to 70% of [U.S. Catholics] would visit Rome and take part in celebration and visit Holy Father if given the opportunity," he says.

ORP, Father Atuire says, isn't looking to make a profit, though he acknowledges that it has a steely business approach.

"I need to continue to remind myself that this is a pastoral mission, because the kinds of issues I have to deal with are so commercial," he says. "I need to dedicate a bit of time every day to make sure I'm on track as a priest."

—*Davide Berretta contributed to this article.*

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