

Bespoke silk robes await Pope Francis on Thailand visit

By Jerry Harmer
The Associated Press

BANGKOK — Thailand's capital boasts garment makers ranging from bespoke tailors to sweatshops, but for a truly divine frock, you have to look a little harder.

In a Catholic preparatory school, seamstresses from the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Sisters of Bangkok are studiously snipping and sewing. They've been working tirelessly, running up the ceremonial garments Pope Francis will wear during his four-day visit to Thailand later this month.

Using Thai silk, the nimble-fingered outfitters have made two full sets of custom robes, in gold-and-white and in vivid red, to grace the pontiff at two public masses before tens of thousands of the faithful.

They are also stitching almost 200 robes for accompanying bishops, though no silk for them: Theirs are made of polyester.

The strong colors of the pope's two robes, known as chasubles, are not just to ensure he's visible from a distance — they also convey meaning. The visit's organizers say the gold and white symbolize innocence and joyfulness, while the red represents love and the blood of martyrs.

An air of quiet concentration pervades the high-ceilinged room where the 11-member team of sisters have been racing the clock, 10 hours a day, ever since the 82-year-old pope's measurements arrived from the Vatican in September.

Despite nervousness over the approaching deadline, they say they're on track. Soon they'll send the



SACRED SEAMSTRESSES. Sister Sukanya Sukchai, right, adjusts newly made chasubles at a Catholic preparatory school in Bangkok, Thailand. Seamstresses from the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Sisters of Bangkok are studiously snipping and sewing, fashioning robes for the visit of Pope Francis. They've been working tirelessly, running up the ceremonial garments Pope Francis will wear during his four-day visit to Thailand. (AP Photo/Gemunu Amarasinghe)

chasubles to the Vatican's embassy in Bangkok for final approval.

"I felt that we didn't have much time, but I wasn't worried that we wouldn't finish them," said Sister Sukanya Sukchai, a member of the tailoring team.

"I knew that god would help. I knew that his help would come in time so that we would finish the job — despite our stress about not being able to complete the task."

The pope's robes often incorporate designs relating to the country he's in. Two years ago in Myanmar, his green chasuble bore the country's national flower, the bright yellow padauk.

For Thailand, an ancient motif known as a "kranok" emblazons the cloth. The intricate design is frequently seen carved in the stone or

wood of Thai temples.

The priest behind the idea, the Rev. Naruenat Pankrod, said by phone from Italy that he worried the kranok might be too elaborate for a pontiff who favors simplicity, but it's received the seal of approval.

The tailors hope the same will go for the garments themselves.

Gaysorn Srihera, who leads the tailoring team, said she can't wait to see the fruits of their labor before a worldwide audience.

"I am very excited. I want to see how good the vestments that I made could look. I am very excited and happy," she said.

Pope Francis will arrive in Thailand November 20 before heading off to Japan three days later, where a new set of tailor-made robes will await him.

China tests Mars lander in international cooperation push

By Samuel McNeil
The Associated Press

HUAILAI, China — China showed off its Mars spacecraft during a landing test as the country pushes for inclusion in more global space projects.

The demonstration of hovering, obstacle avoidance, and deceleration capabilities was conducted at a site outside Beijing simulating conditions on the red planet, where the pull of gravity is about one-third that of Earth.

China plans to launch a lander and rover to Mars next year to explore parts of the planet, one of four scheduled missions. The U.S. and Europe are also sending rovers to Mars next year, and the United Arab Emirates plans to launch an orbiter.

China's burgeoning space program achieved a lunar milestone earlier this year by landing a spacecraft on the mysterious far side of the moon.

It has developed rapidly, especially since it conducted its first crewed mission in 2003, and has sought cooperation with space agencies from Europe and elsewhere.

The U.S., however, has banned most space cooperation with China out of national security concerns, keeping China from participating in the International Space Station.

Despite that, China's ambitions continue to grow as it seeks to rival the U.S., Russia, and Europe in space and cement its position as a regional and global power. It is gradually constructing its own larger, more permanent space station in which it has invited foreign participation.

The lander successfully avoided ground obstacles during a simulated low-gravity descent, according to the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, the Chinese space program's main contractor.

The refrigerator-sized craft was lowered gently on 36 cables through the air for about a minute and used onboard jets spraying rust-colored fumes to alter its downward course.

"After the probe is launched, it will take about seven months to reach Mars, and the final procedure of landing will only last about seven minutes, which is the most difficult and the most risky part of the whole mission," said the Mars mission's chief designer, Zhang Rongqiao,



MARS MISSION SIMULATION. A lander is lifted during a test of hovering, obstacle avoidance, and deceleration capabilities at a facility in Huailai in China's Hebei province. China invited international observers to the test of its Mars lander as it pushes for inclusion in more global space projects. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

standing before the 460-foot-tall testing facility.

Many Mars-bound spacecraft launched by the U.S., Russia, and other countries have been lost or destroyed over the years. Only the U.S. has pulled it off and has made eight successful landings.

The remote test site lies an hour north of the Great Wall from Beijing.

Guests at the event came from 19 countries and included the ambassadors of Brazil, France, and Italy.

"This event is the first public appearance of China's Mars exploration mission, also an important measure for China to pragmatically carry out space international exchanges and cooperation," the China National Space Administration said in a statement.

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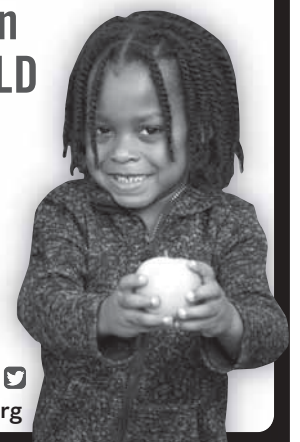
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