

Parishioners encourage U.S. involvement in Holy Land crisis

Colleen Guler of Catonsville was convinced by the Catholic Relief Services' Jerusalem representative to lend her voice in support of U.S. involvement in the humanitarian crisis in the Holy Land, but she was admittedly an easy sell.

As a social studies teacher at Catholic High School, Baltimore, Ms. Guler has involved herself in several worldwide causes and was drawn in by Tom Garofalo's first-hand account of the urgent needs of the civilians caught in the crossfire of the Palestinian/Israeli struggle.

"The humanitarian crisis in the Holy Land is very important to me and I'm ready to let our elected officials know it," said the Church of the Resurrection, Ellicott City, parishioner.

Ms. Guler was among a group of 10 parishioners at Resurrection to hear Mr. Garofalo's narrative of the suffering among people in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza.

The 42-year-old CRS envoy is on a two-week mission in Baltimore and Washington May 9-May 18 to lobby congress for humanitarian aid and diplomatic intervention in the Holy Land and to engage parishioners in the peace process.

Mr. Garofalo also spoke to about 100 parishioners at St. Louis, Clarksville, scores of students at The Seton Keough High School, Baltimore, knocked on the doors of congressmen on Capitol Hill, sat down for an interview on Howard County Comcast Cable Channel 73, and addressed a room full of priests in the Baltimore Archdiocese May 14 at the CRS headquarters in Baltimore.

The program - "Building Peace for Israelis and Palestinians" - will air on the Howard County cable station 11 a.m., 3 and 7 p.m. Mondays and Fridays from May 14 through June 15.

"The humanitarian crisis is unacceptable," Mr. Garofalo said. "Nearly half of Palestinians don't have reliable access to food, one in four Palestinian workers is unemployed, and others are working but not being paid because of economic sanctions and basic services like health and education have been severely compromised."

Two-thirds (about two million) of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza currently live on less than \$2 a day and rely on humanitarian aid to sustain their families, according to a United Nations report.

More than 500 checkpoints and obstacles in the West Bank - a region the size of Delaware - obstruct freedom of movement, CRS officials report.

Mr. Garofalo said the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers and violent attacks by Palestinian extremists has resulted in military action that has left innocent Palestinian civilians without power, schools, medical treatment and in the line of stray bullets.

"They don't deserve this," he said. "Their leaders have let them down. While they are unhappy with the Israelis, they are unhappy with their leaders too. This is another reason why U.S. involvement is so vital."

CRS is hoping Mr. Garofalo's two-week Baltimore-Washington mission will urge Americans of all faiths to voice their support for peace in the Middle East that will guarantee security for Israel and a viable state for Palestinians, said Christine H. Tucker, Mid-Atlantic regional director for CRS and a parishioner of St. Louis, Clarksville.

She stressed that CRS and the U.S. Catholic Bishops have not adopted a pro-

Palestinian standpoint, but that the needs of Palestinians living in the region are the greatest.

“What you have in this region of the world are two people - Israelis and Palestinians - and three religious groups - Jews, Muslims and Christians - trying desperately to live in harmony with each other, but can’t get this roadmap to peace on their own,” Ms. Tucker said. “They desperately need the help of the U.S.”

CRS officials urged parishioners to join a pilgrimage to the Holy Land next fall - led by Bishop Denis Madden, urban vicar, to get first-hand knowledge about the realities in the region.

Mr. Garofalo urged the students at The Seton Keough High School to join Cyber Bridges - an internet connection that allows the youth in the Holy Land to stay connected with their peers around the world.