

‘United by our common desire’ Archbishop Lori, interfaith leaders pray for peace in Iraq

By Maria Wiering

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UPDATED Aug. 26 with collection amounts — In what he called an “act of prayerful solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Iraq,” Archbishop William E. Lori joined with Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders Aug. 24 at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary to pray for peace in Iraq.

“Though some of our beliefs may differ, and though we may draw those beliefs from different sacred texts, we are united by our common desire for peace, goodness in the world, and religious freedom and tolerance,” he said.

“Because of our faith in God, we are bound by a common belief in prayer, and in its power to end suffering and to bring about hope.”

Accompanying Archbishop Lori were Cardinal Edwin F. O’Brien, Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem and former archbishop of Baltimore; Bishop Denis J. Madden, auxiliary bishop of Baltimore and chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs; Rabbi Michael Meyerstein, former head of the Baltimore Board of Rabbis; Imam Earl El-Amin, resident imam of the Muslim Community Cultural Center of Baltimore; Rev. Alvin C. Hathaway Sr., pastor of Union Baptist Church in Baltimore; Bishop Wolfgang D. Herz-Lane, bishop of the Delaware-Maryland Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; and Bishop Eugene T. Sutton of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland.

To view a slideshow from the event, navigate the arrows below.

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About 350 people attended the 50-minute prayer service, including priests, religious sisters and other religious and community leaders, as well as representatives of Catholic Relief Services, the Baltimore-based humanitarian arm of the U.S. Catholic bishops.

The service included readings from the Bible, Quran and Siddur Sim Shalom, a Jewish prayer book, and reflections from different religious leaders.

The prayer service was a response to escalating violence in Iraq at the hands of terrorist organization Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, including the murders

of Iraqi Christians and other religious minorities. Earlier in the week ISIS released a YouTube video of a militant beheading James Foley, an American journalist, a Catholic and the first U.S. citizen confirmed to be killed by the terrorist group.

In separate remarks, the religious leaders at the prayer service called for a greater love for mankind, for individuals to search their own consciences to root out evil, and for worldwide respect for all human life.

After reading a passage from the Gospel of John where Jesus told his disciples, "Let not your hearts be troubled," Bishop Herz-Lane questioned whether Christ would have said the same thing to people today.

"Trouble is all around us," he said, listing the wars in Iraq, the Gaza Strip and Syria, the Ebola outbreak in Africa, tension between Ukraine and Russia, violence in Central America causing youths to illegally cross the U.S. border, and rioting in Ferguson, Mo., following the fatal shooting of an unarmed black man by a white cop. However, Bishop Herz-Lane said, Scripture commands believers "not to be afraid" more than 160 times, because a relationship with God should reassure people of faith.

"What better way to meet the challenges of our time than to come together as one?" he asked, referring to the prayer service.

Cardinal O'Brien, whose role includes defending and promoting Christianity in the Holy Land, emphasized that terrorist acts cannot be motivated by true religious faith, which only leads one to love. He said it was significant for the service to be held in the basilica, a monument to religious freedom in America.

"We recognize the horrendous price being paid by men, women and children at the hands of brutal terrorists in Iraq," he said.

In closing remarks, Archbishop Lori asked people to continue to pray for peace in Iraq, after the news "disappears from the headlines" because Iraqis' "suffering has deep roots, requiring our attention for a long time."

Attending the prayer service was something Joe Wyda, a parishioner of St. Ignatius Loyola in Baltimore, felt compelled to do.

"We've been feeling strongly about this for a long time," he said. "It's not just a Catholic or a Christian issue, so it's nice to be here."

Shelia Bennett, a parishioner of St. Philip Neri in Linthicum Heights, said it was "astonishing to have so many people of different faiths in one building, one area, talking about peace in Iraq."

"If we keep praying for the people over there, there will eventually be peace," she said.

Bill O'Keefe, Catholic Relief Services' vice president for government relations and advocacy, said the service will inspire him in his week ahead, as he and other CRS staff members continue to support their colleagues "in the field" in areas of conflict.

The prayer service raised \$6,500 in a collection for CRS.

Prayer “has a huge role” in ending the violence in Iraq, said O’Keefe, who worships at Loyola University Maryland.

“We can’t solve this situation, and we need prayer ourselves everyday,” he said. “The people on the ground do need a sustainable solution that is above our individual ability to bring it to them” with material humanitarian efforts alone.

He said the interfaith nature of the prayer service demonstrated that people of all faiths are concerned.

“The Christians who fled Mosul into other parts of northern Iraq experienced the hospitality of fellow Christians, Yazidis and Sunnis, so that kind of generous spirit that people on the ground feel for each other is something we can mirror here,” he said. “We’re all in it together.”

Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Mary Adele White said she’s been praying alone for peace, but it was better to join others for the intention.

“It gives me faith and hope that something can happen with so many people begging God for peace,” she said. “They left here, and I’m sure they’ll continue praying.”

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