

We must recognize dignity of all, Orlando bishop says at prayer vigil

By Christine Young and Teresa Peterson

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ORLANDO, Fla.- In Orlando and major cities around the nation and the world, people gathered June 13 to pay tribute to those killed and injured in the shooting rampage in Orlando the previous day.

About 700 people also gathered to pray for those attacked and for peace in the world at St. James Cathedral, less than two miles up the street from where the shootings took place at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando.

The interfaith prayer service was led by Orlando Bishop John G. Noonan, who was joined on the altar by Bishop Robert N. Lynch of St. Petersburg, 10 priests of the Orlando Diocese and other religious leaders.

"Our presence here tonight is a symbol of hope. We come to pray," said Bishop Noonan.

He was joined by Imam Tariq Rashid, of the Islamic Center of Orlando; Bishop Greg Brewer, of the Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida; Deacon Michael Matheny, of St. Luke Episcopal Cathedral; Huseyin Peker, the Atlantic Institute-Central Florida; the Rev. Tom McCloskey, of First United Methodist Church in Orlando; and the Revs. John Harris, Downtown Baptist Church, and the Rev. Robert Spooner, of Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church.

"We come not as different religions but one in the Lord," said Bishop Noonan, who noted that he was familiar with violence in his home country of Ireland and stressed that people will only find peace when they recognize the dignity of all people as children of God.

The half-hour service - with readings about love and peace and songs echoing that message - was a somber one. Those in the congregation lit candles and exited quietly after singing "Let There Be Peace on Earth."

When he invited the local community to attend the service, Bishop Noonan said he hoped it would provide an opportunity for all to join each other in prayer that would "bring about an outpouring of the mercy of God within the heart of our community." He urged people to pray "for healing from this vicious assault on human life," for comfort for those suffering loss and "a sincere conversion of heart for all who perpetrate acts of terror in our world."

Natalia Gil, a 22-year-old parishioner of St. Isaac Jogues in Orlando, attended the prayer service with 10 others from her parish. "We're all one big family. We're here

in the name of Jesus,” she told the Florida Catholic, newspaper of the Diocese of Orlando.

“We are gathered here because maybe not all of us have someone in common that we know, but we are all one community no matter the religion, what they believed in or who they were,” she added. Some in her group knew the victims either by face or by name. One young woman in the group held back tears and was unable to speak as she mourned for a cousin who was at Pulse nightclub that night.

Gil said she spoke for the group when she said faith is the source of their strength.

“It’s making us want to help our community more. The strength God has given us, the faith he has given us. The spirit he has given us to move forward to want to help others and console others. We are here to receive so we can give back,” she said.

Imam Rashid, who was invited to participate in the prayer service by his friend Father John Giel, pastor of Holy Family Parish in Orlando, has lived in Orlando for 22 years and has three children in the schools in the city.

“I consider this my city and the city of my children. I feel the same sentiments. I feel extra pain because I have dedicated my life in service to the community. This is the time when the local community from different religions should come together and show terrorists that no matter how much evil they do, they cannot break our unity or break our strength,” he said.

Maria Torres, an accredited representative for Comprehensive Refugee Services at Catholic Charities of Central Florida, attended the prayer service to help translate for Spanish speakers and offer support and consolation to victim’s families.

Torres, who volunteered at the agency’s headquarters where family members were told to wait to hear notifications if loved ones had survived, said it was a blessing to be at the cathedral.

“We can pray anywhere, but it is a special blessing to be here at this vigil, to join with other members of our community in prayer for the victims and their families,” she said.

In the Diocese of Beaumont, Texas, Bishop Curtis J. Guillory celebrated Mass at St. Anthony Cathedral Basilica for those affected by the mass shooting, which left 50 dead (including the gunman) and more than 50 wounded.

Police said a lone gunman identified as 29-year-old Omar Mir Seddique Mateen – opened fire inside the Pulse club in Orlando in the early morning hours of June 13. News reports said that Mateen, who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State terrorist group, died in a gun battle with SWAT team members.

In his homily, Bishop Guillory said it is OK to be angry about what happened, as he was, but that anger shouldn’t take over. “We cannot allow our anger to be the GPS that moves us. Rather, it ought to be our faith,” he said.

He also urged the congregation not to “pass judgment as the perpetrator did on a

group of people. It's easy for us to do. It's easy for us to blame the whole Muslim world simply because this individual was a Muslim."

"Think about it, we did not blame all of the Germans for Hitler nor did we blame all Anglos because of what happened in Charleston," he said, referring to the white shooter who killed nine people at a historically black church in South Carolina.

"This is where we cannot be guided by our anger," Bishop Guillory added.

Holy Cross in Federal Hill will host a "prayerful remembrance for those who died in Orlando" June 14 at 7 p.m. Participants will pray the rosary.

Also see:

'A sword has pierced heart' of city, says Orlando bishop about shooting

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