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Jerusalem patriarch says people are capable of achieving peace

Judith Sudilovsky Catholic News Service | Jun. 5, 2008

JERUSALEM (CNS) -- People are capable of achieving peace and loving one another just as God loves each of them, Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem told about 160 worshippers gathered to emphasize the need for peace in the Holy Land.

"We have come here to pray because each one of us believes in God, in his goodness and the good in each one of us," the patriarch said at a June 4 ecumenical prayer service at St. Stephen's Cathedral, part of the Dominican-run French Biblical and Archaeological School of Jerusalem. The service marked the opening of the third International Church Action Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel.

"We pray so all of us can be effective peacemakers in our societies," the patriarch said.

The week of activities is sponsored by the World Council of Churches. Pax Christi International and World Vision also were involved in the planning this year. Events were to run through June 10.

The week is intended to send a signal to policymakers and individuals about "the urgent need for a peace settlement that secures the legitimate rights and future of both peoples," said a WCC press release.

The patriarch, who will be retiring June 22, said participants' prayers for peace also were intended for all those people around the world suffering under oppression, war and poverty.

In addition to Patriarch Sabbah, representatives of the Evangelical Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, Anglican and Syrian Catholic churches took part in leading the service.

An hour after their arrival, friends Rana Qumsiyeh, 38, and Rana Khoury, 38, Lutherans from Bethlehem, West Bank, quietly slipped out the back door. Their Israeli-issued travel permits allowed them to remain in Jerusalem only until 7 p.m., they explained, and they needed to hurry to catch public transportation back to Bethlehem in order to stay within the terms of their permits.

"I attended the prayer service last year and felt it was very powerful seeing the ecumenical aspect, and I wanted to see it again," said Khoury. She said she hoped the time would come when they would not have to rush back through the checkpoint into Bethlehem to avoid troubles with travel permits.

Toward the end of the service the worshippers -- who included local residents as well as visiting students from Europe, seminarians from Africa and activists from various countries -- recited the Lord's Prayer in their own languages.

Dan Richards, 36, a British citizen married to a Palestinian from Jerusalem, came to the prayer service with his 8-month-old daughter, Yasmine.

"It is important to worship together to mark the cause for justice and peace," he said. "It is important for all the churches to come together around the world. As a first-time father it means a lot to me that Yasmine grow up

here with peace and justice."

The World Council of Churches said parishes and church groups in 17 countries have activities planned to coincide with the action week. The ecumenical liturgy used for the prayer service in Jerusalem also was available online for other church groups to follow.

"Here is the biggest (religious) division ... in the world," said Anna Maria del Prete, 65, a graduate student in theology from Italy. "Here we need to pray together to grow peace in ourselves and peace around us."

A common Jerusalem prayer from the heads of Christian churches in Jerusalem was issued in May and was to be recited June 8 by the participating groups.

The week was to include a multicultural peace service with Arabic and Jewish music in Oslo, Norway; a human clock in Bethlehem, counting off 60 years since the 1948 war that Palestinians call their "Nakba," or catastrophe, and that Israelis see as the year of their independence; study sessions in Sri Lankan parishes; and Filipino children affected by violence writing to Palestinian children.

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