

Muslims, Christians share Thanksgiving, pray for peace

Muslim visitors emphasize 'true tenets' of Islam during Thanksgiving Mass at Weston parish.

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WESTON

Outraged by deadly church bombings in Iraq, Catholics and Muslims met in south Florida to learn about similarities between their faiths and pray for peace.

During Thanksgiving Day Mass at St. Katharine Drexel Parish in Weston, Altaf Ali, the Florida director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), stood before hundreds of Catholics and said Muslim law forbids attacking Christians or their houses of worship.

"I want to extend my condolences for what has happened to your churches in Muslim lands," Ali told churchgoers in a brief presentation that drew a standing ovation from the predominantly Hispanic audience. "This is not the true tenet of Islam."

He also read verses from the Koran — the sacred book of Islam that draws parallels between the two faiths.

The August and October attacks battered 11 churches in Iraq, killing at least 12 people, injuring dozens more, and sending waves of fear through Christian communities in the war-torn country.

Ali's appearance at the Mass was prompted by comments that St. Katharine Drexel's pastor, Father Paul E. Edwards, published in the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*.

In his column, Father Edwards called on local Muslim groups to condemn terrorist attacks on churches and help



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Altaf Ali addresses the congregation at St. Katharine Drexel Church in Weston during the Thanksgiving Day Mass. Father Paul Edwards, pastor, seated at left, precipitated the visit with comments he made in a newspaper column.

repair or rebuild damaged and destroyed sanctuaries in Baghdad and Mosul.

"Would it be overtly bold to ask for a show of support and solidarity from the local Muslim community?" Father Edwards wrote.

A number of national and international Muslim organizations had already condemned the attacks.

Upon reading the column, Ali got in

touch with the pastor and the Thanksgiving Day presentation was arranged.

"We were very concerned that he was standing alone on this issue," Ali said in comments separate from the presentation. "It's important for us to take part in these kinds of events."

Money collected at the Thanksgiving Mass would support church rebuilding efforts in Iraq, Father Edwards said,

reiterating his soft-spoken call for unity between Muslims, Christians and Jews.

"We need to be open to our brothers and sisters in the faith," he said, "and as Americans and Catholics we have to do the same for people of other faiths."

The invasion of Iraq has led to the deaths of more than 1,200 U.S. soldiers and an estimated 10,000 Iraqis, and heightened religious tensions across the Middle East. Before the invasion, some 800,000 Christians lived in Iraq. Experts estimate that tens of thousands have since fled the country.

There are more than a billion Muslims living in countries as different, and as distant, as Nigeria and the Philippines. Interpretations of the religion's laws are as diverse as Islam itself and often spark vehement debate.

Muslim scholars and others emphasize the peaceful nature of the religion, pointing to passages from the Koran, the holy book of Islam, which forbids violence. Meanwhile, armed groups in Iraq and other countries point to different passages as justification for killing.

Ali said that even in war, Islamic law forbids attacking people for their religious beliefs and the same protection applies to churches.

"Churches are sanctuaries of God and they have to be highly protected and defended," Ali said. "When there are Christians living under Muslim rule, they are supposed to be protected also."

Ali's appearance came just weeks after Pope John Paul II met with Baghdad's new envoy to the Vatican and expressed deep concern for religious freedom in Iraq.

CAIR, based in Washington D.C., works to educate non-Muslims about Islam and promote peace between people of different religions.