

After Tucson shootings, faith leaders try to help heal pain

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Jan. 12, 2011



A woman prays during a Jan. 11 Mass at St. Odilia Church in Tucson, Ariz., for victims of the Jan. 8 shootings. (CNS photo/Greg Bryan, pool via Arizona Daily Star)

WASHINGTON -- As Tucsonans continue to reel from the Jan. 8 shooting spree at a shopping center that left six dead and another 14 wounded, religious leaders around the country look to help heal the emotional pain through prayer and memorial services.

Tucson Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas presided at a public commemoration and healing service yesterday and is expected to participate in the funerals later in the week for his friend, Judge John Roll, 63, and 9-year-old Christina Taylor Green, both Catholics.

He also was a part of an interfaith memorial service at Catalina United Methodist Church, also yesterday, which was organized by United Methodist Bishop Minerva Carcano of Phoenix. She attended a public Mass of commemoration at St. Odilia Catholic Church that evening.

The shootings left another person Bishop Kicanas knows well, Rep. Gabrielle Giffords D-Ariz., in critical condition at University Medical Center. She was the apparent target of the alleged shooter, Jared Lee Loughner.

The violence caused trauma for the whole community, Bishop Kicanas told Catholic News Service yesterday in a phone interview. "First we have to grieve, we need to cry and be together, especially for those who were harmed and their families."

Impromptu and organized vigils and prayer services took place around Tucson, at the hospital where most victims were treated, outside Giffords' office in Tucson, at the U.S. Capitol, and at churches and public venues around the country. President Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, are scheduled to attend a large public memorial service today to be held in McKale Center, the arena at the University of Arizona.

Meanwhile, the grieving community of Tucson was focusing some of its emotion on trying to prevent the funerals of shooting victims from becoming a forum for the Kansas-based Westboro Baptist Church to stage its anti-gay and often anti-Catholic protests. The group regularly stages protests at the funerals of service men and

women with crude signs and rhetoric claiming that the deaths are God's retribution for the country's acceptance of homosexuality.

Tucsonans ranging from college students to members of local motorcycle clubs were organizing methods of blocking the Westboro group with large "angel wings" or motorcycles.

Bishop Kicanas said the next steps toward healing after the shootings will mean reflecting on how such a tragedy could occur and what the community can do to ensure it doesn't happen again.

"We may never understand it," he cautioned. But he said it's important to look at gun laws that go far beyond enabling sportsmen to own hunting weapons and the availability of services for people with mental illnesses and addictions, as well as "the ways we respond to conflict."

But first, it's important to live through the experience of grieving, of wondering what happened, of praying, the bishop said.

Besides Roll and Christina Green, the others killed were: Gabriel Zimmerman, 30, who was Giffords' community outreach director, and three retirees: Phyllis Schneck, 79, Dorwin Stoddard, 76, and Dorothy Morris, 76. As of Jan. 11, Giffords and her staff member Ron Barber were the only ones of 14 shooting survivors still in intensive care. Six of the victims, including Giffords staffer Pam Simon, were recovering at the same hospital.

Others with minor injuries were treated at area hospitals and have been released.

They included some of those on the scene who helped capture the shooter. Retired Army National Guard Col. Bill Badger, who is a member of St. Thomas the Apostle Church, where Roll was a parishioner, was among those who helped tackle and restrain Loughner. Badger, 74, told the Arizona Daily Star newspaper that he didn't realize at the time that he'd been grazed by a bullet himself.

Only after sheriff's deputies took charge of the alleged shooter did Badger discover that the blood around him was his own, from a head wound, he said.

The president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, local state and national leaders of the Knights of Columbus -- Roll was a fourth-degree Knight -- and religious leaders of all denominations were among those seeking to calm people through their grief.

"We commend to God those who have died and we pray for the families who lost loved ones and for those who are suffering from their wounds," said Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan, the bishops' president, said in a Jan. 10 statement. "We also pray for the person who committed these acts and those who are responsible for his care."

He cautioned "against drawing any hasty conclusions about the motives of the assailant until we know more from law enforcement authorities. Violence of any kind must be condemned. When the target of a violent act is a public official, it shakes the confidence of the nation in its ability to protect its leaders and those who want to participate in the democratic process."

Dolan called for "respect for the life and dignity of every person as we work together for the common good, seeking to address the various social and political issues that face us as a nation."

In his statement, Supreme Knight Carl Anderson said: "At a time like this, it is tempting to respond with anger, and for some, to attempt to use the tragedy to stoke the fires of division. That would only compound the tragedy."

He quoted the late Sen. Robert Kennedy, who said after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.: "What we need in the United States is not division ... not violence or lawlessness, but love and wisdom and compassion toward one another."

Anderson noted that Roll had just attended daily Mass before stopping to greet Giffords at her community meeting, calling him "a dedicated public servant who understood this very well. Let us honor his life and service by embracing those qualities of 'love and wisdom and compassion.'"

The Rev. Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners, issued a plea for people to turn to Scripture and a civility pledge Sojourners is promoting as a starting point for civil discourse. He noted that he had been with Giffords over the New Year's weekend at a retreat in South Carolina, where some of the discussion was about the "poisonous and personal" tone political rhetoric has taken.

"This horrible tragedy must now become an important American moment," Rev. Wallis wrote. "We must honor this tragic event and Gabby's national service by reflecting deeply on how we speak to and about one another, and how we create environments that help peace grow -- or allow violence and hatred to enter."

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