

Bin Laden's death a tough subject for the pulpit

By BROCK VERGAKIS, Associated Press Brock Vergakis, Associated Press Sun May 8, 4:07 pm ET

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. – The killing of Osama bin Laden, a man who was America's face of evil for nearly a decade, left Christians, Jews and Muslims relieved, proud or even jubilant. For their religious leaders, it was sometimes hard to know just what to say.

There is at least some dissonance between the values they preach and the triumphant response on the streets of New York and Washington to the death of a human being — even one responsible for thousands of killings in those areas and around the world.

"Justice may have been served, but we Catholics never rejoice in the death of a human being," said the Rev. Stephen Mimnaugh.

He did not mention bin Laden during Sunday's morning Mass at Manhattan's St. Francis of Assisi, the church of the late Mychal Judge, chaplain of the Fire Department of New York and the first recorded victim of the Sept. 11 attacks in the city.

After Mass, Mimnaugh cited comments published in *America*, a weekly Catholic magazine. The Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit priest, wrote that "no matter how monstrous" a person is, "as a Christian, I am asked to pray for him and, at some point, forgive him."

Other religious leaders felt compelled to say at least a few words about bin Laden on the first weekend of worship since he was killed. Some focused on moving on and working toward peace, while others spoke approvingly of a death they said marked a blow for justice.

The Rev. David Howard shouted his approval — in a sense — from outside his church in Virginia Beach, Va. "OSAMA BIN LADEN, SATAN AND THE FINAL VICTORY OF JESUS," read the marquee outside Brook Baptist Church, publicizing the sermon Howard started writing hours after he heard that a team of Navy SEALs based in Virginia Beach killed the al-Qaida leader.

Howard has no doubt that bin Laden was an instrument of Satan brought to justice with the aid of God, who answered the prayers of millions.

"We should pray for bad people, evil people, that when we pray to God he will change their lives. But if he won't change their lives, especially those who have a lot of power to hurt a lot of people, you pray for their end because they're causing so much pain," he said. "You pray somehow God will take them out. The Bible is very clear that God is in control and every person in power is because God put them there. He can put them there, he can keep them there or he can take them out. That's his prerogative."

The leader of one of the nation's largest mosques was equally direct during prayers Friday.

"There is no doubt that this man was a thug, he was a murderer," Imam Hassan al-Qazwini told worshippers at the Islamic Center of America in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn. "His hands were stained by the blood of thousands of innocent people — Muslims and non-Muslims alike."

Qazwini, who delivered his sermon in a large, circular hall filled to capacity, said the Quran is clear that someone who kills one innocent person "is doomed to hell forever." And the imam was particularly incensed that bin Laden "committed atrocities against innocent people ... while he was calling 'Allahu akbar,'" or "God is great."

"He's responsible for tarnishing the image of Islam in this country," he said. "We're happy to see the man who caused so much pain for Muslims in this country is gone ... finally."

Before the sermon, Qazwini said Muslims are discouraged from showing jubilation over death, but cheering the news of bin Laden's demise marks an occasion where "justice was served."

At Armitage Baptist Church on Chicago's near west side, Pastor Charles Lyons told his congregation Sunday that sometimes "evil must be stopped."

"We do not rejoice in the death of the man named Osama bin Laden (but) ... truth provides a platform for justice," he said. Church member Angelia Parker said bin Laden's death should have been a time for contemplation, not cheering in the streets.

"I think that was kind of weird," said Parker, who was passing out roses to mothers after the service. "It was like, 'Are you kidding me?' We are celebrating this person's death? We didn't celebrate in the streets when Saddam Hussein was killed."

The Rev. Bill Kelly, priest at Saint Mary of the Assumption in Dedham, Mass., near Boston, said he was taken aback by the celebrations because he detected bloodlust. But he added that the emotional reaction is understandable.

"This is 10 years of pent-up anger, hurt, frustration, especially here in the Boston area because the crimes were initiated here," he said, referring to the two planes that took off from Boston before crashing into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

At Second Baptist Church, the oldest black church in South Los Angeles, church member Goward Horton said he was happy about bin Laden's death and didn't think that conflicted with his beliefs.

"We should be allowed to have relief, happiness, joy. Especially if you were touched by what happened on 9/11," Horton said. "Me, personally, I'm not one to take to the streets in celebration over his death, but I understood when people did it." The Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader and Nobel Peace laureate, said Tuesday in Los Angeles that although bin Laden may have deserved compassion and even forgiveness as a human being, it is sometimes necessary to take counter-measures.

"Forgiveness doesn't mean forget what happened," he told students at the University of Southern California.

Reform Rabbi Eric Wisnia, of Princeton, N.J.'s Congregation Beth Chaim, observed that during the Passover holiday that ended April 26, Jews recount the 10 plagues carried out against Egyptian aggressors by dipping their fingers in wine 10 times. But they are forbidden to lick their fingers, lest they take pleasure in the pain of others.

As he left a Quaker meeting in Philadelphia, Fred Koszewnik of Marlton, N.J., said he thought the celebrations were "kind of icky."

"Honestly, I'm glad he's dead, but I don't know that's something to celebrate," he said. "If I understand anything about Quakerism, there's something of God in everyone."

Chuck Esser, who was at the same Quaker meeting, said he understands the relief at bin Laden's death — his own nephew was injured in the New York attacks and had to be pulled from the rubble. But he said he wishes the terror leader had been captured and put on trial.

"It's very strange for our country to be celebrating assassinations," he said. He said bin Laden "embodies a lot of evil things, but our response is not in tune with the best traditions of our country and our God."

At Congregation Neve Shalom, a Conservative Jewish synagogue in Metuchen, N.J., Rabbi Gerald Zelizer said in an interview that according to the Talmud, if someone is trying to kill you, "you are obligated — not permitted — to kill that person before he kills you."

"But that obligation does not carry with it at all the privilege of rejoicing," he added.

As services ended at the synagogue Friday, a heated debate over how to respond broke out. Kathryn Zahler, a compliance administrator from Colonia, N.J., said that taking delight in anyone's death feels un-Jewish.

"For what it's worth, he had a family. He's obviously a very evil man. I think there was a sense of relief, but I wasn't celebrating," Zahler said.

But Mindy Epstein, a medical assistant also from Colonia, said she took joy in bin Laden's death, noting that al-Qaida showed no decency when it released a video of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl being decapitated in 2002. "I don't care if that makes me a non-Jew or not," Epstein said. "Put it on pay for view for the (Sept. 11) victims."

In his Saturday morning sermon, Zelizer reminded congregants that the day bin Laden was killed was also Holocaust Remembrance Day. He suggested that the phrase often used in reference to Adolf Hitler might also be appropriate for bin Laden: "May his name be blotted out and his memory forgotten."

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