Karachi's Catholic Achbishop, Joseph Coutts joined Rev John Hornblow (representing Archbishop David Moxon, Director of the Anglican Centre in Rome) in presiding over an ecumenical prayer service at the Church of St Bartholomew, in Rome, 13 October for the 153 Christians killed and the 160 seriously wounded in the suicide bombing of All Saints Church of Pakistan, in Peshawar, Pakistan.

Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury voiced that those who were killed were martyrs for their faith.

Fr Robert McCulloch, who has worked in Pakistan for 34 years and is now procurator-general of the Columban Fathers, welcomed the congregation which included the deputy head of mission of the Pakistan embassy to Italy, clergy and faithful from All Saints Anglican Church in Rome, St Paul's Episcopalian Church, the Methodist Church in Rome, the Italian Association of Pakistani Christians, and the Community of San Egidio. The prayer service was held in Italian, Urdu and English.

In the week prior, ambassadors accredited to the Holy See joined Archbishop David Moxon, Rev Kenneth Howcroft, Fr Anthony Currer (Pontifical Council of Christian Unity) and Fr McCulloch at the Columban House, in Rome, to discuss with Archbishop Coutts the political, religious and ecumenical implications of the church bombing.

Ecumenical prayer in Rome for the victims of Pakistani church bombing

The man trying to give a vote of thanks had difficulty keeping back the tears. So did I. Fifteen members of his family had been slaughtered. He came from Peshawar and was speaking on behalf of the Association of Pakistani Christians in Italy.

The occasion was an ecumenical service of prayer to commemorate the Christians who were killed because of their faith in a suicide bombing on September 22 at All Saints Church, Peshawar. Modern martyrs, in every sense of that word.

The service was in the Basilica of San Bartolomeo (St Bartholomew the Apostle) in the Tiber Island in Rome. It is, fittingly, a place with centuries-old traditions of healing and of commemorating martyrs. In modern times it has become a centre for the St Egidio community, a group mainly of lay people who work with the poor around the world to bear witness to their faith. They also preserve the memories of those who have been martyred or died in witness to their faith. Each year there is a moving service commemorating the martyrs from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries from all Christian traditions, including Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Pentecostal.

We came together on a Sunday afternoon from all those traditions to pray for the situation in Pakistan.

Eleven days previously I had been privileged to be invited to a working lunch with the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Karachi, Archbishop Joseph Coutts. He is the chairman of the Pakistan Episcopal Conference. As such, he is the spokesman for the Catholic Church in Pakistan on issues of human rights and religious freedom. He therefore has an important role in presenting nationally and internationally the position of Pakistani Christians in response to the suicide bombing of All Saints Church in Peshawar.

Also present at the lunch were the Ambassadors to the Holy See from the states of South Korea, the Netherlands and Australia, and the Deputy Head of Mission of the British Embassy to the Holy See; a representative of the Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity, the Archbishop of Canterbury's representative in Rome, and myself representing the world-wide Methodist family of churches; and a Pakistani priest who works for the charity Caritas Asia . The meeting was hosted by Fr. Robert McCulloch, the Procurator General of the Missionary Society of St. Columban, which has extensive work in Pakistan.

The meeting was sombre, but also hopeful. The Archbishop described how the suicide bombers came from a small group of people with a particular mindset. They were certainly a danger to Christians, but also to Hindus, Moslems, the state of Pakistan and democracy. In the face of these threats, the differences and divisions between Christian groups pale into insignificance. The churches need to work together, and also work with others.

We asked what we could do. One answer was that the churches of all traditions need to ensure that the next generation of their leaders are properly formed. Sadly, for this to happen they may need to leave Pakistan for a time to be trained and formed elsewhere, before returning to Pakistan. But rigorous immigration controls mean that this is increasingly difficult. Governments and churches together could try to create situations where churches in other countries can give necessary assurances to governments that Pakistani students coming from partner churches are bona fide, will not be a burden on the state, and will return to Pakistan at the end of their period of training and formation.

Another answer was that ecumenically the churches outside Pakistan should work together in relating to Pakistan, in order to support the churches in Pakistan in working together at a time when they were under intense pressure. Great appreciation was expressed for the Archbishop of Canterbury's strong statement in response to the massacre.

But above all, we can pray. Pray for the victims. Pray for the perpetrators. Pray in solidarity with all those affected. And as we pray, learn what it means to take up the Cross.

That is what we did on that Sunday afternoon, led by people from many traditions and with wonderful singing of psalms in Punjabi by Pakistani nuns. The Archbishop referred back to a previous massacre, following which he wondered whether to cancel the Christmas Eve midnight service in order to protect the congregation. He was told that "If they are going to kill us, it is better that we are worshipping in the house of God". Similarly, attendance at churches has increased since the Peshawar bombing.

On the Sundays following the bombing, many Muslims linked arms to form a human chain around Christian churches in Karachi and Lahore. They were demonstrating their solidarity with Christians and their desire to protect them. Another sign of hope.

I was deeply moved.

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