

Ties to Lebanon strong for one Florida parish

By **Teresa Lantigua Peterson**, Orlando

As the bombs fall from the sky in Lebanon, cities and lives are torn apart by the violence and everyone worries and wonders what will happen next. In the Diocese of Orlando, there is one church where the conflict hits very close to home.

St. Jude Catholic Church, a Maronite branch of the Catholic Church, traces its history to Lebanon, where early Catholics fiercely defended their faith amid years of Arab occupation and oppression. In the early seventh century, when many of the people in the Middle East were converting to Islam, the Maronites took refuge in Mount Lebanon to preserve their identity and faith.

Father George Zina, pastor of St. Jude, has been closely watching the television news since Israel launched a massive military offensive against Lebanon and Hezbollah, a group of terrorist Islamic militants, July 12.

He left Lebanon eight years ago and moved to Orlando to start a mission, which eventually became St. Jude Catholic Church. His father still lives in Lebanon and he knows parishioners who are in Lebanon and are unable to evacuate. With power outages and downed telephone lines, communication is difficult.

"Everyone's praying for them to be back safe at home. The people of Lebanon are desperate for peace. It is like they are living in a desert, dying of thirst," Father Zina said.

The church held a special Mass for peace July 23, the day Pope Benedict XVI asked Catholics around the world to offer special prayers and acts of penance for peace in the Middle East.



Father George Zina of St. Jude Maronite Catholic Church shows how Communion is distributed in the Maronite Mass. The priest dips the body into the blood of Christ and places it on the tongue of the communicant.

St. Jude also organized a day of prayer for peace in Lebanon July 27. The day's schedule included praying the rosary, Mass, a novena to St. Jude, Benediction and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

Father Zina said the majority of Lebanese people do not support Hezbollah and are caught in the middle of a war that is out of their control.

"The army is too weak. For 30 years, the Syrians controlled everything. Right now, it's impossible for the Lebanese army and the government to disarm Hezbollah," he said. "The Lebanese people are highly educated and open-minded. They love and admire freedom and democracy. Lebanon is the only democratic country in the Middle East before Israel existed."

Father Zina said the Syrian occupation of Lebanon for more than 30 years has left the country fractured, with a president who is a "puppet of Syria" and does not represent the Lebanese people. Lebanon is currently 35 percent to 40 percent Christian, but at one time, Christians represented the majority.

"We used to be the majority, but not anymore. Christians are leaving for America, Canada, Latin America, Australia. They want to find peace and they are seeking refuge, freedom, democracy. They have been living under persecution for many years," he said.

The current battle leaves Father Zina with a sense of dread.

"The problem is very serious. It's a wake-up call to the whole world. Communism is over. This millennium, the most dangerous and terrible war you're going to face is the fanatic Islam. You're fighting ideology," Father Zina said.

There is good news, however, in the way many of the world leaders are coming together for a common cause.

"All the European countries are side by side working with the U.S. The French, British, Italians, U.N. and E.U. (European Union) and America are working side by side for Lebanon," Father Zina said.

Bishop Thomas Wenski of Orlando is hopeful that Lebanon could one day be an example of peace and unity.

"We believe that Lebanon, as the late Pope John Paul II said, should be a model for people of different faiths living together in peace. The current conflict puts at risk the progress that has been made to free Lebanon from outside domination and from being used as a pawn in a larger struggle," said Bishop Wenski in a statement he

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- The Maronites are named after St. Maron, a holy priest and monk who lived near the ancient city of Antioch, which is located in what is now southern Turkey. He converted a pagan temple, ministered to people of God and performed many healings of the body and spirit.
- For many centuries, the Maronites were the only Christians in the East who were in complete communion with the pope in Rome and have always maintained the unity.
- The Catholic Church is made up of 22 Eastern and Western churches. The Maronite Church is one of the oldest traditions of the Catholic Church.

wrote as chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Policy.

"Our conference appeals to all leaders in the region and to the leaders of our nation to make it clear that violence, from whatever side, for whatever purpose, cannot bring a lasting or just peace in the land we call holy," Bishop Wenski said.

Catholic Relief Services is responding to the humanitarian needs of those affected by escalating violence in the region. To help support its work, please go to www.crs.org.

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