

# The Florida Catholic

Close

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*Hundreds gather to pray for Middle East peace at Miami-area Maronite Catholic parish*

## 'We're not in the mood for war'

**By Ana Rodriguez-Soto, Miami**

From their relatives' homes in the hills north of Beirut, Danielle Mrad and Pierre Assaf watched a war break out.

"It was really, really scary," said Mrad, 19, who was in Lebanon to visit her grandparents. "Every night at 2 a.m. they started bombing. And we just listened and prayed."

"I could see the bombs going down in the capital," said Assaf, 20, a student at Miami Dade College who was visiting his parents and sisters back home.

Both were evacuated from Lebanon by the U.S. Navy. They arrived in south Florida just hours before a July 25 prayer vigil and candlelight procession hosted by Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church in Coral Way.

"We want to show the world that the Lebanese are fighting war with prayer and forgiveness," said Nabil Salem, a Knight of Columbus and member of the parish. "We're not in the mood for war."



TFC PHOTOS BY ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO

**Members of the Missionaries of Charity of Mother Teresa are among those in attendance at the prayer service and candlelight procession for peace in Lebanon and the Middle East.**

The sentiment was echoed by many others of Lebanese descent. For them, this outbreak of fighting elicits a tragic sense of déjà vu — all the more shocking because their country finally seemed to be rising from the ashes of the 1975 to 1990 civil war.

"We have nothing to do with this," said Mrad, who said both she and her family were totally taken by surprise when the fighting started. "We had no idea it was coming."

"(We're) paying the price for the actions of Hezbollah," said Christian Hage, 19, also expressing what many others felt.

During the prayer service, Father Elie Mikhael, pastor of Our Lady of Lebanon, called the Lebanese people "the least ones" of whom Jesus spoke in the Beatitudes. He prayed that "the voices of the little ones will be heard."

Afterward, he said he was "touched" by the number of people who attended the prayer service, many of whom were not Lebanese. Among those in the standing-room-only crowd was Rabbi Hector Evelbaum of a Cuban-Jewish congregation in North Miami.

"That's a sign of solidarity. That's beautiful," Father Mikhael said.

Most of his parishioners blame Hezbollah for starting the fighting, but also expressed concern that Israel has gone too far in defending itself.

Hezbollah is a mostly Shiite militia, backed by Syria and Iran, which occupies the southern tip of Lebanon. It is the only one of the militant factions which was not disarmed after the civil war.

But this is not another civil war, Salem emphasized. "They're not in the mood for fighting, the Lebanese on all sides. They're all calling for national unity."

In fact, while the majority of those displaced by the fighting are Shiites, those giving them shelter are Christians. The Lebanese patriarch has publicly called for all convents, monasteries and churches to open their doors to those fleeing the bombings.

"You should hear the Muslim women saying 'thank you' to



**During the prayer service, Father Elie Mikhael introduces four young people whom he called the "generation of war" because, like their parents 30 years earlier, they had been forced to flee Lebanon, where they were visiting relatives. From left are Jihane Mrad, 23; Pierre Assaf, 20; Danielle Mrad, 19; and Rene Hermes, 19.**

every Christian home, every Maronite home, who opened their door to receive (them)," said Father Mikhael, adding that most of the aid currently reaching Lebanon is being sent by groups such as the Catholic Near East Welfare Association and Catholic Relief Services.

But the longer the fighting continues, the more people will be displaced and the more the country will suffer economically.

Salem said Lebanon had received half a million visitors at the beginning of May and 1.5 million more were expected through the end of the year. Now, all the tourists are gone, an estimated 600,000 people are displaced — about one-third of Lebanon's total population — and another 600,000 have taken them in.

"More than half of Lebanon will be in misery," Salem said.

He summed up his feelings — and those of many other Lebanese people — this way: "Hezbollah made a mistake (by provoking Israel) and Israel has a right to defend itself. Britain had a right to defend itself, too, from the IRA (Irish Republican Army). But they didn't bomb Ireland."

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**Deep in prayer, a woman takes part in the vigil for peace at Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church in Miami.**