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United Nations diplomats and other guests gather for a prayer service at the Church of the Holy Family in New York City Sept. 12, 2022. The service, hosted by the Vatican's permanent observer mission to the U.N., was held on the eve of the opening of the 77th session of the U.N. General Assembly. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

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New York — September 11, 2024

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Bishop David J. Malloy of Rockford, Illinois, quoted Pope Benedict XVI in praying for peace Sept. 9 as dignitaries gathered for a prayer service on the eve of the United Nations' 79th session of the General Assembly.

The United Nations Annual Prayer Service was held at the Church of the Holy Family on East 47th Street, just across First Avenue from United Nations headquarters. The yearly service is offered by the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations.

The dignitaries included U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, who is the permanent representative of the Holy See to the United Nations, and the respective U.N. sessions' presidents.

Past chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, Malloy gave the evening's reflection, quoting Pope Benedict XVI's remarks on April 18, 2008, to the United Nations.

"The Holy See and its mission, centered on its faith in Jesus Christ, recognizes that the true path to peace," Malloy said, "is based in 'the common desire to place the human person at the heart of institutions, laws and the workings of society, and to consider the human person essential for the world of culture, religion, and science.'"

At the start of the service, Msgr. Joseph LaMorte, vicar general of the Archdiocese of New York and now pastor of the newly merged parish of Holy Family-St. John the Evangelist-Our Lady of Peace, welcomed the guests of honor, along with approximately 250 diplomats, U.N. staff and members of the community.

Among the attendees was Father Roger Landry, who on Sept. 5 was named the new national director of Pontifical Mission Societies USA, effective in January. A priest of the Diocese of Fall River, Massachusetts, Landry is also a former attaché at the Holy See's U.N. mission. Also in attendance was Msgr. Peter Vaccari, president of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association.

"Our parish has served the people of the Turtle Bay neighborhood (in Midtown Manhattan) since 1924," LaMorte said in his remarks. "In 1965 Francis Cardinal Spellman inaugurated this new church building and designated that it be of service to the spiritual needs of all those who work for the cause of peace, justice and human development at the United Nations."

The priest recalled that St. Paul VI "made his historic visit to New York to speak at the U.N. General Assembly" in October of that same year and afterward "met with religious and civic leaders here at Holy Family Church."

"Our annual gathering is an ongoing response to Pope St. Paul VI's desire that all those who work for peace be united in prayer to God for his gift of peace," LaMorte said. The Church of the Holy Family is the official Catholic church of the United Nations.

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Father Mark Knestout, attaché of the Holy See's permanent mission, then introduced and welcomed Secretary-General Guterres.

"Despite humanitarian crises, despite division and conflict, poverty, violations of human rights, and despite rampant inequality, we must have faith," the former prime minister of Portugal said.

"A better world exists, and the means to create it is within us all. This is my message to all of you for the challenging weeks of the General Assembly and the subsequent future. Thank you for your prayers today. Today and every day, let's try for a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world for all," the secretary-general said.

The next speaker was Ambassador Dennis Francis of Trinidad and Tobago, who was president of the 78th session of the U.N. General Assembly. "Peace begins with each and every one of us. It's in our hearts and in our minds. It is in the respect we choose to show or not to show," Francis said.

He was followed by Ambassador Philemon Yang of Cameroon, president of the 79th session of the U.N. General Assembly. "Let us take a moment to pray for answers, and to pray for common solutions and compromise. Let us embrace our better selves, and our common humanity," he said.

The vespers service continued with the office of evening prayer, office hymn, psalmody, three antiphons, and a reading from the New Testament, 1 Peter 5:1-4. Knestout then introduced Malloy to offer the reflection.

"Recognition and respect for human dignity is reverence for human nature, for the very humanity that we share. This is an important commitment because we live in a time when the very opposite, not humanization but dehumanization is widespread," Malloy said.

"There is much work to be done. But that means, on this evening of prayer, there is much about which we should beseech God."

"May he strengthen all the efforts of the coming year to protect and deepen the commitment to human dignity. May the work of the secretary-general, the president of the General Assembly, and all of the representatives and staff contribute to the lofty goals of the United Nations Organization and may they be guided by the hand of God," he said.

After the responsory, the intercessions were read in the six official languages of the United Nations — Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, French, Russian, Arabic and English. Caccia offered the closing prayer.

"God of mercy and love, you offer all peoples the dignity of sharing in your life. By the example and prayers of St. Peter Claver, strengthen us to overcome all racial hatreds and to love each other as brothers and sisters. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen."

St. Peter Claver, for whom this year's pontifical vespers was offered, is the patron saint of slaves, Colombia and ministry to African Americans.

Upon conclusion of the service, Caccia and Malloy greeted guests outside the church.