

Obama praises Boston for overcoming the 'face of evil'

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(RNS) President Barack Obama praised Bostonians for their actions "in the face of evil" during an interfaith memorial service on Thursday (April 18) for victims of the Boston Marathon bombing.

"You've shown us, Boston, that in the face of evil, Americans will lift up what's good. In the face of cruelty, we will choose compassion," Obama said.

The 90-minute service at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross featured local political figures and religious leaders from Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions. Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley shared a greeting with the congregants from Pope Francis.

"The Holy Father invokes God's peace upon our dead, consolation upon the suffering and God's strength upon all those engaged in the continuing work of relief and response," O'Malley said.

Obama opened his remarks with Scripture, and quoted it throughout his speech.

"Scripture teaches us, 'God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.' And that's the spirit you've displayed in recent days," Obama said.

Obama said that for millions of Americans, the attacks on Boston were personal. "Every one of us has been touched by the attack on your beloved city. Every one of us stands with you," he said.

The president also encouraged those who were injured: "You will walk again," he said.

"This time next year, on the third Monday in April, the world will return to this great American city to run harder than ever and cheer even louder for the 118th Boston Marathon. Bet on it," Obama declared to rousing applause.

Two bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon on Monday, killing three people and injuring more than 170. Investigators have identified possible suspects on video footage, but haven't made any arrests yet.

The service attracted complaints, however, from a local coalition of nonbelievers who said they were not included despite multiple outreach efforts to organizers at the Archdiocese of Boston, the mayor's office and the governor's office.

"I wanted to give them the opportunity to be as fully inclusive as possible," said Zachary Bos, co-chair of the Secular Coalition for Massachusetts, an umbrella group of 14 atheist and humanist groups. "They fumbled it and that leaves me a little baffled."

Sarah Chandonnet, a staffer at Harvard University's humanist chaplaincy, said she had two friends who were grievously injured in Monday's attacks. She felt left out of Thursday's service.

"I feel that the pain I feel for those close to me, and the city I have lived in my entire life, are not heard or shared," she said in an email. "I feel excluded, and silenced, because of my identity. I wish more atheists and the nonreligious could feel supported by their city."