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Pope Francis presides over a prayer for peace with other Christian leaders inside Rome's Colo

Pope Francis presides over a prayer for peace with other Christian leaders inside Rome's Colosseum before joining other religious leaders launching an appeal for peace Oct. 25, 2022. (CNS photo/Remo Casilli, Reuters)



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Pope Francis on Oct. 25 joined an assembly of global political and religious leaders gathered at Rome's Colosseum to lament Russia's continuing invasion of Ukraine, saying that "peace has been gravely violated, assaulted and trampled upon" and warning against any possible use of nuclear weapons.

"Today, in fact, something we dreaded and hoped never to hear of again is threatened outright: the use of atomic weapons," said Francis.

The pope, who was joined by a host of interfaith leaders, turned to the words of Pope John XXIII, issued in 1962 at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis — when the world was then on the brink of nuclear destruction — saying the late pope's words are now his own.

"We plead with all government leaders not to remain deaf to this cry of humanity. Let them do everything in their power to safeguard peace," said Francis, quoting John. "They will thus spare the world the horrors of a war, the terrible consequences of which cannot be foreseen."

Francis' remarks came during the closing ceremony of the Oct. 23-25 "Cry for Peace" conference, hosted by the international Community of Sant'Egidio, a lay-led Catholic social service organization based in Rome.

While Sant'Egidio has invited religious, political and cultural leaders from around the world to gather for dialogue and to pray for peace each year since St. John Paul II's interreligious prayer for peace in Assisi, Italy in 1986, this year's gathering took on particular urgency amid the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Since the start of the war in February, Francis has attempted to stake out a cautious position by strongly condemning the war and repeatedly expressing support for Ukraine, while at the same time offering to serve as a mediator with Russia and saying that he refuses to reduce the war to a conflict between "between good guys and bad guys."

Francis struck a similar tone during the Oct. 25 prayer service, saying "let us not fall into the trap of hatred for the enemy."

"Let us once more put peace at the heart of our vision for the future, as the primary goal of our personal, social and political activity at every level," the pope continued. "Let us defuse conflicts by the weapon of dialogue."

An emphasis on the importance of dialogue is a hallmark of the event's organizers' work.

Known as the “United Nations of Trastevere,” a reference to the Roman neighborhood where it is headquartered, Sant'Egidio was founded in 1968 and has been instrumental in peace processes in place like Guatemala, Kosovo, and, most notably, Mozambique, where it helped bring about an end to the country's 16-year civil war.

On Oct. 23, France's President Emmanuel Macron — who opened the three-day Sant'Egidio conference in Rome — repeatedly emphasized his country's ongoing support for Ukraine, while also expressing a desire to see the war reach its

conclusion.

On Oct. 24, Macron met with Francis and afterwards, he told reporters that he had urged the pope to personally call both Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden to encourage them to engage in dialogue for the sake of peace in Ukraine.

"We need the United States to sit around the table to promote the peace process in Ukraine," said Macron, adding that he believed Biden has a "real relationship of trust" with Francis and that the pope could be of influence on him.

In early February, prior to the start of the war, Macron traveled to Moscow in a last minute bid to convince Putin not to invade Ukraine.

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Eight months into the war, with no end in sight and rising energy costs across the world, there is some concern that the western-led coalition supporting Ukraine may be beginning to fracture. In Rome, at the start of the peace conference, Macron said it would be up to the Ukrainian people to decide the moment and terms of an eventual peace deal.

“Peace will be built with the other, who today is the enemy, around a table, and the international community will be there,” he said, expressing his desire that Russia would one might be ready to acquiesce and reach a peace agreement.

At the Colosseum, Francis issued his own call for an immediate peace and doubled-down on his push for nonviolence.

"We are not 'neutral, but allied for peace,' and for that reason “we invoke the…right of all to settle conflicts without violence," he said.

Even so, last month Francis told reporters that believed that other countries supplying Ukrainians with arms could be morally acceptable, as long as it is not done with the intention of furthering conflict.

"To defend oneself is not only licit, it is also an expression of love toward one's homeland," the pope said at the time.

But surrounded by political and religious leaders and the global peace activists gathered in Rome, the pope again made clear his desire for an end to the conflict.

"The plea for peace cannot be suppressed: it rises from the hearts of mothers; it is deeply etched on the faces of refugees, displaced families, the wounded and the dying," the pope said. "And this silent plea rises up to heaven. It has no magic formulas for ending conflict, but it does have the sacred right to implore peace in the name of all those who suffer, and it deserves to be heard."

"Let us never grow resigned to war," he concluded. "Let us cultivate seeds of reconciliation."