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Pope Francis writes in a notebook on a desk. Next to him stands a man in a tuxedo

Pope Francis writes a message to the Turkish people during a meeting with Ufuk Ulutas, Turkey's new ambassador to the Holy See, in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Feb. 16, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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"I am close to you, and I pray for you," Pope Francis told the Turkish people reeling from earthquakes that killed nearly 42,000 people in Turkey and neighboring Syria, according to figures updated Feb. 16.

During a meeting with Ufuk Ulutas, Turkey's new ambassador to the Holy See, the pope wrote a message to the "noble Turkish people" and said his thoughts and prayers are with them "in this moment of so much pain."

Two 7.8 and 7.5 magnitude earthquakes struck southern Turkey Feb. 6. Ten days after the quakes, at least 36,000 people were reported dead in Turkey and another 5,800 in Syria.

Via the papal almoner, Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, Francis sent 10,000 thermal shirts to earthquake victims in southern Turkey Feb. 15. Over 6.3 million people in the region are believed to be sleeping in temporary lodging such as tents and shipping containers in below-freezing temperatures.

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Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, prefect of the Dicastery for Eastern Churches, was scheduled to travel to Turkey and Syria Feb. 17-21 to express the pope's closeness to those affected by the earthquake, the Vatican said Feb. 16.

The archbishop was scheduled to meet with Catholic relief organizations and religious congregations working on the ground as well as the leaders of Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim communities in the region. In Damascus, Syria, the archbishop planned to visit a mosque hosting people left homeless after the earthquake.

The dicastery said in a statement that Gugerotti's trip aims "to encourage all those working to confront the emergency," and to express "the need to establish better coordination" among relief efforts that will be needed in the coming months.