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Cardinal Matteo Zuppi delivers his address opening the works of the 77th General Assembly of the Italian Bishops Conference at the Vatican, Tuesday, May 23, 2023. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

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Pope Francis’ peace envoy for Ukraine, a veteran of the Catholic Church's conflict-mediation efforts, blasted war as a "pandemic" on May 23 and said all Christians are called to be peacemakers.

In his first public comments since being named Ukraine envoy, Cardinal Matteo Zuppi called for the creation of a culture of peace to respond to the "deep anxiety, sometimes unexpressed, often unheard, of peoples who need peace."

The Vatican on May 20 confirmed that Francis had tasked Zuppi with a mission "to help ease tensions in the conflict in Ukraine, in the never-ending hope by the Holy Father, that this can initiate paths of peace." No further details were released, with the Vatican saying that they were still under study.

Zuppi, 67, is the archbishop of Bologna, president of the Italian bishops’ conference and a veteran of the Catholic Church’s peace mediation initiatives through his longtime affiliation with the Sant’Egidio Community. Through the Rome-based charity, Zuppi helped mediate the 1990s peace deals ending civil wars in Guatemala and Mozambique and headed the commission negotiating a cease-fire in Burundi in 2000, according to Sant'Egidio.

A pastor in Francis’ style and considered "papabile" — having the qualities of a future pope — Zuppi was named last year to head the Italian bishops conference, and in that role opened the conference’s spring meeting May 23 with a wide-ranging speech about the Italian church that also dwelled on Ukraine.

Quoting Francis, Zuppi recalled the pontiff's frequent, emotional expressions of solidarity with the "martyred" Ukrainian people, and appeared to address the frequent criticism of the Vatican’s diplomatic tradition of neutrality and Francis’ unwillingness to publicly call out the Kremlin.

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Zuppi suggested Francis was by no means neutral in demanding peace.

"We are grateful today for his prophecy, so rare today when talking about peace seems to avoid taking sides or fail to acknowledge responsibility," he said.

Saying all Christians are called to do their part to bring peace, he said: "War is a pandemic. It involves all of us."

"The church and Christians believe in peace, we are all called to be peacemakers, even more so in the terrible storm of conflicts," he said.

Francis announced the existence of a peace mission while en route home last month from Hungary, where he met with an envoy of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has strongly supported the war. In the weeks since, Francis has met at the Vatican with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who made clear he would not accept territorial concessions and rejected Francis' reference to victims on both sides of the conflict, saying there can be no equivalence between victim and aggressor.