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An older white bishop's image is on a large projector above a hall where seats form a ring

Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, Vatican foreign minister, reads via video link a message from Pope Francis to the U.N. Security Council during a meeting at the U.N. headquarters in New York June 14, 2023. (CNS screengrab/Courtesy United Nations)

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"The time has come to say an emphatic 'no' to war" and state decisively "that wars are not just," Pope Francis said in a message to the U.N. Security Council.

In his message, read by Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, the Vatican's foreign minister, Francis said he accepted the invitation to address the meeting June 14 because "conflicts are growing, and stability is increasingly put at risk. We are experiencing a third world war fought piecemeal, which, as time passes, seems to become ever more widespread."

The pope's speech was part of a Security Council ministerial-level briefing on the theme of "the values of human fraternity in promoting and sustaining peace."

Organized by the United Arab Emirates, which is presiding over the council in June, the briefing at the U.N. headquarters also included António Guterres, the U.N. secretary-general, and Sheikh Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar mosque and university. Francis and the sheikh signed a document on human fraternity during a meeting in the United Arab Emirates in 2019.

Gallagher read the pope's message in a video link with the meeting because Francis was still in Rome's Gemelli hospital after undergoing surgery to repair a hernia.

In his 2020 encyclical "Fratelli Tutti, on Fraternity and Social Friendship," Francis questioned whether with modern warfare any conflict could be judged a "just war" because proportionality and the protection of civilians seem difficult if not impossible to guarantee.

The pope was even more critical of traditional just war theory in the text he prepared for the Security Council briefing.

"We must move away from the logic of the legitimacy of war," he said. Even "if this were valid in earlier times, when wars were more limited in scope, in our own day, with nuclear weapons and those of mass destruction, the battlefield has become practically unlimited, and the effects potentially catastrophic."

"The time has come to say an emphatic 'no' to war, to state that wars are not just, but only peace is just: a stable and lasting peace, built not on the precarious balance of deterrence, but on the fraternity that unites us," Francis said.

Fraternity recognizes that "we are all brothers and sisters, journeying on the same earth, dwelling in a single common home," he said, "and we cannot darken the heaven under which we live with the clouds of nationalisms."

While peacemaking "requires passion and patience, experience and farsightedness, tenacity and dedication, dialogue and diplomacy," he said, it also includes listening -- 'listening to the cries of those who are suffering because of wars, especially children. Their tear-stained eyes judge us: the future we prepare for them will be the court of our present choices."

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Francis said he is not among those who see the Security Council as "powerless and paralyzed," but he said the council cannot fulfill its promise of safeguarding peace unless it sets aside "ideologies and narrow visions, partisan ideas and interests."

While technology, communications and trade have brought people closer together, he said, they have not increased people's awareness of being brothers and sisters.

"Indeed, we are suffering from a famine of fraternity, which arises from the many situations of injustice, poverty and inequality and also from the lack of a culture of solidarity," the pope said.

"The worst effect of this famine of fraternity," he said, "is armed conflict and war that makes enemies of not only individuals but entire peoples and whose negative consequences reverberate for generations."

The hope that the United Nations, founded after the two world wars of the 20th century, would move the world toward lasting peace and becoming, "at last, a family of nations," has not been realized, the pope said. In fact, it seems that "we are going backward in history, with the rise of myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive nationalisms that have kindled conflicts which are not only anachronistic and outdated, but even more violent."

Francis wrote in his message that as a person of faith he believes "that peace is God's dream for humanity," but the nightmare of war persists.

And, he said, part of the problem is economic because war, with its weapon sales, "promotes profit, but always for a few and at the expense of the well-being of entire populations."

"It takes more courage to renounce easy profits for the sake of keeping peace than to sell ever more sophisticated and powerful weapons," he said. "It takes more courage to seek peace than to wage war. It takes more courage to promote encounter than confrontation, to sit at the negotiating table than to continue hostilities."

Still, the pope insisted it is not too late to prioritize peace.

"There is still time to write a new chapter of peace in history: we can do so in such a way that war would belong to the past, not to the future," he said. The first step is "to increase now, without fear, what is needed to promote fraternity and peace for

the entire planet.