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Pope Francis stands at his apartment window and raises one hand as he speaks behind a clea

Pope Francis smiles and waves at visitors gathered in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican after praying the Angelus July 30, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

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Destroying grain is a "grave offense to God," Pope Francis said, appealing to authorities in Russia as "my brothers" and urging them to resume cooperating with a United Nations' initiative to guarantee the safe transport of grain out of Ukraine.

"Let us not cease to pray for beleaguered Ukraine, where the war is destroying everything, even grain," he said after praying the Angelus with people gathered in St. Peter's Square July 30, 2023.

"This is a grave offense to God, because grain is his gift to feed humanity; and the cry of millions of brothers and sisters who suffer hunger rises to heaven," he said.

"I appeal to my brothers, the authorities of the Russian Federation, that the Black Sea Initiative may be restored and grain may be transported safely," he said.

The pope was referring to a U.N. initiative that started in Aug. 2022, allowing millions of tons of grain and other crops harvested in Ukraine to be exported across the Black Sea.

However, Russian government authorities announced July 17 it would no longer take part in the agreement, effectively blockading Ukraine's Black Sea ports and forcing more shipments to take an already congested route along the Danube River.

Since then Ukraine's ports on the Danube and grain storage facilities have been targeted by drone and missile strikes; Ukrainian authorities said 60,000 tons of agricultural products were destroyed at a site in Odesa, estimated to have been able to feed 270,000 people for a year. Ukraine was ranked fifth among the largest exporters of wheat worldwide for 2022-2023, according to Statista, and it is also a major world supplier of sunflower oil, barley and corn.

After his Angelus prayer, Francis made a number of appeals and calls for prayers, including for the upcoming Aug. 4 anniversary of a massive explosion in the port of Beirut in 2020. A fire caused thousands of tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate to detonate, killing more than 210 people and wreaking widespread damage to homes, roads and infrastructure.

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"I renew my prayer for the victims and their families, who are seeking truth and justice, and I hope that Lebanon's complex crisis may find a solution worthy of the history and values of that people. Let us not forget that Lebanon is also a message," he said, referring to their history as a land of tolerance and pluralism.

The pope also marked the U.N.'s International Friendship Day and World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, celebrated July 30.

"The first promotes friendship between peoples and cultures; the second combats the crime that turns people into commodities," he said.

"God bless those who work to fight against trafficking," he said, adding that "trafficking is a terrible reality, affecting too many people: children, women, workers..., so many exploited people; all living in inhuman conditions and suffering indifference and rejection by society."

The pope also asked that people "accompany me with prayer in my journey to Portugal," where he will go Aug. 2-6 for World Youth Day.

"A great many young people, from all continents, will experience the joy of the encounter with God and with their brothers and sisters, guided by the Virgin Mary," he said. "I entrust the World Youth Day pilgrims and all young people of the world to her, shining star of the Christian path."

In his reflection on the day's Gospel reading from St. Matthew before praying the Angelus, the pope said Jesus is like a precious "pearl" that must be sought, found, cherished and "made one's own."

"It is worth investing everything in him because, when one encounters Christ, life changes," he said. He is the greatest good in life and the faithful must seek to "find and embrace Jesus with all of oneself."