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Pope Francis speaks during his annual meeting with diplomats accredited to the Holy See at t

Pope Francis speaks during his annual meeting with diplomats accredited to the Holy See at the Vatican Jan. 8. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis on Jan. 8 used an annual "State of the World" address to global ambassadors representing their countries at the Holy See to decry two divergent issues: the treatment of civilian victims as "collateral damage" amid the ongoing wars in Gaza and Ukraine, and the practice of surrogate motherhood.

"Modern wars no longer take place only on clearly defined battlefields, nor do they involve soldiers alone," said Francis. "In a context where it appears that the distinction between military and civil objectives is no longer respected, there is no conflict that does not end up in some way indiscriminately striking the civilian population."

These grave violations of international humanitarian law — "war crimes" as the pope characterized them — should not just be documented, said Francis, but prevented from occurring in the first place.

"There is a need for greater effort on the part of the international community to defend and implement humanitarian law, which seems to be the only way to ensure the defense of human dignity in situations of warfare," the pope demanded.

While the pope used his closely watched annual address to primarily focus on ongoing conflicts around the globe, Francis also waded into the debates over surrogate motherhood, lambasting the practice as a "grave violation of the dignity of the woman and the child, based on the exploitation of situations of the mother's material needs."

As a number of countries are considering various legislation on surrogacy due to its increased usage as a means to have children, the pope called for a universal ban on the practice, saying "a child is always a gift and never the basis of a commercial contract."

While Francis has previously condemned surrogacy as an "inhuman practice," this marked the first time he has explicitly called for a universal ban.

During the pontiff's 45-minute address, Francis repeated his condemnations of the Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas against Israel and denounced the rising tide of antisemitism, but lamented the "exceptionally grave humanitarian crisis" resulting from Israel's ongoing military response.

According to Gaza's health ministry, more than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed over the last three months, with more than a million displaced since the start of the war.

"Perhaps we need to realize more clearly that civilian victims are not 'collateral damage,' but men and women, with names and surnames, who lose their lives. They are children who are orphaned and deprived of their future," the pope decried. "They are individuals who suffer from hunger, thirst and cold, or are mutilated as an effect of the power of modern explosives."

As tensions continue to mount throughout the Middle East with rising fears of a wider conflict in the region, the pope called for a ceasefire "on every front, including Lebanon" and also urged diplomats to restart negotiations on the "Iran nuclear deal ," the multinational effort to curb the country's ability to produce nuclear weapons.

More broadly, the pope condemned the "immorality" of both manufacturing and possessing any form of nuclear weapons.

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Francis went on to use his remarks to the 184 countries accredited to the Holy See to encourage a broader commitment to disarmament and diverting funds used for weapons for a global fund to eliminate hunger and promote sustainable development.

At the start of a year where more than half of the world's population is expected to go to the polls to vote in major elections taking place in more than 50 countries, Francis called for "free and informed" participation in elections.

"Politics, for its part, should always be understood not as an appropriation of power, but as the 'highest form of charity,' and thus of service to one’s neighbor within a local or national community," said the pope.

The pope went on to use his remarks to plead for greater multilateral collaboration on a number of fronts, especially in combating climate change, responding to the global surge in migration, and regulating the rise of artificial intelligence.

Francis praised the progress made at last month's United Nations COP28 climate summit, saying, "Care for creation and peace 'are the most urgent issues and they are closely linked.' "

The 87-year-old Francis had originally planned to attend the Dubai summit in person, but had to cancel due to a bronchitis infection. He said that the conference made clear that "the present decade is critical for dealing with climate change."

During his remarks, the pope also drew attention to the increased persecution and discrimination against Christians around the globe.

"At times, this involves nonviolent but socially significant cases of gradual marginalization and exclusion from political and social life and from the exercise of certain professions, even in traditionally Christian lands," said Francis. "All together, more than 360 million Christians around the world are experiencing a high level of discrimination and persecution because of their faith, with more and more of them being forced to flee their homelands."

In particular, the pope deplored the "protracted crisis" in Nicaragua, where the country's Sandinista regime has recently escalated its crackdown against the Catholic Church in the country, including the arrest of two bishops and more than a dozen priests.

As the pope took stock of the Vatican's diplomatic priorities, he also highlighted its expanded geographic footprint through the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Oman during 2023, as well as an agreement with Vietnam to allow for the presence of a resident papal representative within that country.

While there is much speculation about where the pope may travel in the year ahead — including a potential visit to his native Argentina, a speculated late summer trip to Belgium, and possibly Oceania — to date, no overseas trips have been officially announced.

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