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Joe Donnelly, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, attends a conference on immigration Sept. 27, 2022, in Rome. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Following Pope Francis' call to the international community to support a total cease-fire in the Middle East, President Joe Biden's representative to the Vatican said the United States is working "nonstop" to prevent civilian deaths in Gaza, but stopped short of backing a cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war.

"The president has worked nonstop to try to coordinate with the Israeli government to tell them, 'Look, you really have to focus on protecting the citizens, that we stand for your right to protect your country to defend yourself. But at the same time, how do we save the lives of the children of Gaza?' " said Joe Donnelly, the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See.

"Israel has a complete right to defend itself," said Donnelly in an interview with the National Catholic Reporter on Jan 9. "But in that process, they also have an obligation to protect the citizens of Gaza, that both our Israeli brothers and sisters and our Palestinian brothers and sisters have the right to try to live in peace. And so that is what we hope for, that's what we work to achieve."

Donnelly, a former U.S. senator and representative from Indiana, spoke to NCR as part of "The Vatican Briefing" podcast the day after Francis' annual "State of the World" address to diplomats of the 184 countries accredited to the Holy See on Jan. 8.

In his closely watched speech, the pope decried the treatment of civilian victims as "collateral damage" amid the ongoing wars in Gaza and Ukraine, and called for a

ceasefire "on every front, including Lebanon," as tensions continue to rise in the region following Hamas' brutal Oct. 7 attack against Israel.



Pope Francis greets Joe Donnelly, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, after his annual address to the diplomatic corps Jan. 8 in the Hall of Blessings at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

While Donnelly defended Israel's right to defend itself and said the U.S. believes that Hamas "can never be the government" of Gaza again, he said the United States is "doing everything humanly possible to keep the people of Gaza safe."

Reflecting on the pope's 45-minute address, the ambassador — who took up his post just after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine — said he believed it was significant that the pope specifically named "the Russian Federation" in his remarks as the aggressor in the war.

At the start of the war, Francis came under criticism for suggesting that NATO was at least in part responsible for the war.

Donnelly said the U.S. has sought to provide the Holy See with a "clear understanding" of who is responsible for the war, and said he believes the Vatican is "now speaking with a very, very clear voice that Russia has attacked Ukraine."

The ambassador also spoke of what he described as the United States' "ongoing effort" to partner with Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, Pope Francis' personal peace envoy in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, to repatriate an estimated 30,000 Ukrainian children that have been kidnapped by Russia since the start of the war.

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"We have lists of children we work every day to try to bring home, and so I expect that there will be more in the future," he said. "But they've taken 30,000 children. It's the heartbeat of a nation, your children."

The ambassador also went on to offer observations about the 87-year-old Francis' health, as well as the pope's remarks on climate change and the importance of elections in the year ahead.

Donnelly spoke for an episode of "The Vatican Briefing" podcast that also features a conversation between co-hosts Joshua McElwee and Christopher White about Francis' plans for 2024 and the global reactions to the Vatican's Dec. 18 decree making it possible for Catholic priests to bless couples in same-sex unions, under certain conditions.

The episode of "The Vatican Briefing" featuring NCR's full interview with Donnelly is available below. You can also subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or however you listen to podcasts.

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Relevant links for this episode:

- Christopher White's coverage of Pope Francis' Jan. 8 "State of the World" address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See: Pope Francis calls for global ban on surrogate motherhood: Kids not 'commercial contract'
- Ambassador Joe Donnelly's exclusive interview with NCR after arriving in Rome in 2022: US Vatican ambassador: World is looking to Pope Francis to help end Ukraine war
- Ambassador Joe Donnelly's NCR op-ed marking the 10th anniversary of the pope's election: Pope Francis and U.S. share a strong connection
- Catholic News Service's coverage of President Joe Biden's July 2023 meeting with Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi: Repatriating Ukrainian children topped papal envoy's agenda with Biden
- Christopher White's coverage of the Vatican's Dec. 18 declaration allowing for Catholic blessings for gay couples: In major doctrinal shift, Vatican officially OKs Catholic blessings for gay couples
- Catholic News Service's coverage of the response of Catholic bishops in Africa to the Vatican's gay blessings declaration: Catholic bishops across Africa say same-sex blessings 'cannot be carried out' on continent
- NCR's coverage of the response of Catholic bishops in Eastern Europe to the Vatican's gay blessings document: Across Eastern Europe, bishops reject Vatican's opening to same-sex blessings

This story appears in the **The Vatican Briefing** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 2-15, 2024** print issue under the headline: Biden’s Vatican ambassador says US working ‘nonstop’ to save Gaza civilians.