Vatican
View from the Vatican
Pope Francis prays as he begins Easter morning Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Mar

Pope Francis prays as he begins Easter morning Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican March 31, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Pope Francis used his Easter message to reiterate his ongoing appeal for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza and the release of Israeli hostages as war continues to rage in the Holy Land.

"Let us not allow the current hostilities to continue to have grave repercussions on the civil population, by now at the limit of its endurance, and above all on the children," Francis pleaded on March 31, as famine threatens to wreak further havoc on the besieged Gaza Strip.

"How much suffering we see in their eyes!," the pope lamented. "With those eyes, they ask us: Why? Why all this death? Why all this destruction? War is always an absurdity and a defeat!"

Francis has made numerous pleas for peace since the Oct. 7, 2023 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel by the militant Islamic group. While the pope has maintained that Israel has a right to self-defense, Francis and other senior Vatican diplomats have denounced the total siege of Gaza that has resulted in the loss of more than 30,000 Palestinian lives.

As the six-month war continues without an end in sight, the pope used his Easter petitions to beg for a "path to peace" in the land that "witnessed the mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus."

Francis' remarks were delivered from the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the end of the outdoor Easter liturgy in a windy and hazy St. Peter's Square and during his traditional *urbi et orbi* ("to the city and the world") message, which was delivered in lieu of a homily during the Mass.

The pope also offered a litany of prayers for other countries facing violence, terrorism and war, especially in Ukraine, where he expressed hope for a prisoner exchange with Russia. Last month, as the war entered its third year, the two countries exchanged some 100 prisoners.

"Let us not allow the strengthening winds of war to blow on Europe and the Mediterranean," the pope prayed. "Let us not yield to the logic of weapons and rearming. Peace is never made with arms, but with outstretched hands and open hearts."

Along with prayers for peace in Syria and Lebanon, the pope also singled out Haiti, where the country has faced a complete collapse of its government and devolved into a state of total chaos as rival gangs have taken over its capital.

"May the risen Lord assist the Haitian people, so that there can soon be an end to the acts of violence, devastation and bloodshed in that country, and that it can advance on the path to democracy and fraternity," Francis said.

Despite lingering respiratory issues that have plagued the pontiff all winter and at times forced him to rely on an aide to read his speeches, the 87-year-old Francis appeared strong and determined throughout the physically demanding Holy Week liturgies.

On Holy Thursday, March 28, he presided over the Chrism Mass for the priests of the Diocese of Rome, where he delivered a lengthy 20-minute homily, and in the afternoon visited a prison in Rome, where he washed the feet of 12 women inmates.

Francis was also present at the Vatican's Good Friday liturgy and the Saturday Easter Vigil, though for the second year in a row, he did not attend the outdoor Way of the Cross prayer service at Rome's Colosseum on Friday evening.

The pope was joined by more than 30 cardinals, 15 bishops and over 300 priests and some 60,000 pilgrims from all over the world for the Easter Sunday celebration, where more than 35,000 fresh flowers from the Netherlands adorned the outdoor altar.

Despite overcast skies and cool temperatures, mass attendees overflowed from St. Peter's Square and up the *via della Conciliazione*, the major street that leads to the Vatican. After the Mass, the pope spent 15 minutes in the popemobile greeting spirited pilgrims who waved flags from their home countries, chanted *viva il papa!* ("long live the pope") and held up their infants for a special papal blessing.

As he concluded his Easter message, the pope prayed that Christ, who "has set us free from the slavery of death" would "make us aware of the value of every human life, which must be welcomed, protected and loved."

"May the light of the resurrection illuminate our minds and convert our hearts," said Francis. "A happy Easter to all!"