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Pope Francis holds his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Wednesday, April 3, 2024. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

by Associated Press

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Pope Francis led thousands of people in a moment of silence Wednesday to pray for the aid workers killed by an Israeli strike in Gaza and a young Ukrainian soldier named Oleksandre who was killed in ''this madness of war."

Francis appealed anew for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza and the release of hostages taken from Israel on Oct. 7 by Hamas. Praying for the families of the seven World Central Kitchen workers killed, he called for humanitarian aid to reach Gaza's people and for all efforts to prevent the conflict from spreading.

At the end of his general audience, Francis also showed tourists and pilgrims in St. Peter's Square the rosary and camouflaged New Testament book that a 23-year-old Ukrainian soldier named Oleksandre had with him when he was killed in the eastern city of Avdijevka.

They were apparently given to Francis two weeks ago by Sr. Lucia Caram, an Argentine-born nun living in Spain who has spearheaded multiple humanitarian missions to Ukraine to bring in aid and ferry out wounded soldiers.

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According to a March 13 Instagram post, Caram said Francis became emotional during a private audience when she presented him with Oleksandre's rosary and New Testament. She said Francis kissed the rosary, which he himself had blessed on a previous occasion for Caram to distribute in Ukraine.

"He urged me to continue. He gave me more rosaries to bring to Ukraine," she wrote at the time.

In showing off the items Wednesday, Francis flipped through the pages of Oleksandre's underlined New Testament and said the young man still had an entire life ahead of him when he was killed.

He asked for a moment of silent prayer "thinking of this kid and so many like him, killed in this madness of war."

Francis has previously shown off other relics of the Ukraine war, including a battered Ukrainian flag recovered from Bucha, the site of early Russian atrocities.