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Pope Francis releases a dove outside the Basilica of St. Nicholas after meeting with the leade

Pope Francis releases a dove outside the Basilica of St. Nicholas after meeting with the leaders of Christian churches in Bari, Italy, July 7. The pope met Christian leaders for an ecumenical day of prayer for peace in the Middle East. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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Pope Francis on Dec. 12 called for the worldwide abolition of the death penalty, the alleviation of foreign debt and the creation of a global fund to eradicate hunger and combat climate change.

The pope's request came in his message for the World Day of Peace, which is celebrated by the Catholic Church each year on Jan. 1.

Under the title, "Forgive us our trespasses: grant us your peace," the document offers three specific proposals in conjunction with the Vatican's 2025 Jubilee Year, a once-every-quarter-century occurrence rooted in the biblical tradition of forgiving debts.

"I would like once more to propose a concrete gesture that can help foster the culture of life, namely the elimination of the death penalty in all nations," the pope writes in the document. "This penalty not only compromises the inviolability of life but eliminates every human hope of forgiveness and rehabilitation."

Francis' plea comes just days after his urgent appeal on Dec. 8 on behalf of death row inmates in the United States. It follows his 2018 update of the official Catechism of the Catholic Church to declare the death penalty to be "inadmissible."

At present, the death penalty is legal in 27 American states and over 50 countries. An estimated 28,000 people are currently on death row around the world.

In his peace message, the pope also reiterated his call for a new international mechanism to alleviate foreign debt, now estimated at $313 trillion.

"I have repeatedly stated that foreign debt has become a means of control whereby certain governments and private financial institutions of the richer countries unscrupulously and indiscriminately exploit the human and natural resources of poorer countries, simply to satisfy the demands of their own markets," the pope states.

The pope went on to cite Pope John Paul II's appeal for "reducing substantially, if not cancelling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations."

Also included in this year's message is a proposal that a "fixed percentage" of funds used for military spending be diverted to create a global fund to eradicate hunger and support sustainable development and to combat climate change in the developing world.

"We need to work at eliminating every pretext that encourages young people to regard their future as hopeless or dominated by the thirst to avenge the blood of their dear ones," wrote Francis. "The future is a gift meant to enable us to go beyond past failures and to pave new paths of peace."

While none of the proposals in the pope's peace message are novel ideas — the Vatican has advocated for all three initiatives in recent years — the context of widespread war and the upcoming Jubilee Year heighten the urgency of this year's appeal.

"The Jubilee is an event that inspires us to seek to establish the liberating justice of God in our world," wrote Francis in his message.

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Every year the pope sends his peace message to heads of state and other global leaders along with his New Year's wishes. In addition, the pope typically gives an autographed copy of the document to high-profile Vatican visitors.

At a Dec. 12 Vatican press conference, Jesuit Cardinal Michael Czerny — a close collaborator of Francis — said that the Jubilee's challenge is an invitation to "the whole human family to disarm our hearts."

Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network, told reporters that the "death penalty's very existence epitomizes a throwaway culture."

At present, Catholic Mobilizing Network is among the lead organizers of a campaign to push U.S. President Joe Biden to commute the sentences of the 40 inmates currently on federal death row.

"Steadfast, faith-filled advocacy to end the death penalty is an act of profound hope in our world today," Vaillancourt Murphy said.

"No matter the harm someone has suffered or caused, we're looking for healing," she added. "We're not just looking for who can pay."

Czerny told reporters that the upcoming Jubilee Year should be a time for "paying attention and listening to the voice of God, but also to the cry of the poor and the earth."

"It is accepting responsibility for the bonds of injustice, which need to be loosened, for the conflicts that presently plague our human family, and for the devastation to which the earth, our common home, has been subjected," he said.

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