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Pope Francis waves to an estimated 70,000 people gathered in St. Peter's Square at the Vatic

Pope Francis waves to an estimated 70,000 people gathered in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican for his Christmas blessing "urbi et orbi" (to the city and the world) Dec. 25, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis appealed for negotiations to end Russia's ongoing invasion in Ukraine and for a ceasefire in the war-ravaged Middle East during his annual Christmas Day message.

"May the sound of arms be silenced in Ukraine!" said Francis, as he delivered his Dec. 25 *urbi et orbi* ("to the city and the world") message and blessing. "May there be the boldness needed to open the door to negotiation and to gestures of dialogue and encounter, in order to achieve a just and lasting peace."

The pope's plea comes in the wake of yet another Russian missile attack on Ukraine's infrastructure, triggering numerous blackouts throughout the country on Christmas Day. In March, the pope encouraged peace talks to bring about an end to the conflict. Those remarks were widely denounced by Ukrainian government

officials, as they were interpreted as a call for the country to surrender to Russia.

Since then, the Holy See has repeatedly insisted that any negotiations must be aimed toward a "just peace," which includes respecting each country's territorial integrity.

Reflecting on the birth of Christ in the city of Bethlehem, the pontiff used his Christmas message to express solidarity with the Christian communities in Israel and Palestine, and particularly those in Gaza. The pope — who makes nightly calls to Gaza's sole Catholic parish — decried the "grave" humanitarian situation there.

Throughout the last week, the pope has repeatedly condemned what he has described as the "cruelty" of recent Israeli airstrikes targeting schools and hospitals in Gaza, prompting swift backlash from the Israeli government.

"May there be a ceasefire, may the hostages be released and aid be given to the people worn out by hunger and by war," said Francis.

The pope delivered his traditional Christmas Day address from the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica overlooking a crowded square below. Thousands of pilgrims from around the globe gathered in the piazza on a luminous Christmas morning at the Vatican, many waving flags of their various homelands as they listened to the pope's remarks.

As is his custom, the pope used his brief noontime reflections to highlight a number of conflict zones around the world, including Lebanon, Syria, Myanmar, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Mozambique.

This year's Christmas Day peace message comes at a momentous time in the Catholic Church, taking place just hours after the pope officially inaugurated the Vatican's 2025 Jubilee Year.

Over the course of the next year, the 88-year-old pontiff is set to preside over a flurry of events focused on reconciliation and the forgiveness of debts and sins — all of which is expected to bring some 32 million pilgrims to Rome.

Prior to the start of the Christmas Eve Mass last evening, the pope opened the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica, meant to signify new life and salvation.

During his Christmas Day message, the pope reflected on the significance of the moment.

"Entering through that door calls for the sacrifice involved in taking a step forward, leaving behind our disputes and divisions, and surrendering ourselves to the outstretched arms of the child who is the Prince of Peace," said Francis.

"This Christmas, at the beginning of the Jubilee Year, I invite every individual, and all peoples and nations, to find the courage needed to walk through that door, to become pilgrims of hope, to silence the sound of arms and overcome divisions!" he said.

During his speech, the pope also spotlighted the needs of migrants and refugees, the unemployed, prisoners and victims of religious persecution. He also made a special appeal — as he did during his Christmas Eve Mass — for debt relief for poor countries, which is a special focus of the 2025 Jubilee Year.

On Dec. 26, Francis will continue the Jubilee celebrations by opening a special holy door in Rome's Rebibbia Prison.

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