News



Cardinal Matteo Zuppi leads a seven-hour prayer vigil for child victims of the Israel-Hamas War, Thursday, Aug. 14, 2025, at the park of Monte Sole di Marzabotto near Bologna, Italy. (Video screen grab)

Claire Giangravé

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Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, the head of the Italian Bishops' Conference, led a prayer vigil on Thursday (Aug. 14), on the eve of the Feast of the Assumption, where he read the name of every child who has died in the conflict between Israel and Hamas since the start of the war in the Holy Land two years ago.

"We pronounce their names one by one," Zuppi said at the start of the vigil. "They ask us all to commit ourselves to finding or pursuing the path to peace with greater intelligence and passion, starting with a ceasefire and offering the conditions for doing so, from the release of hostages to not taking an entire people hostage."

Zuppi took turns with dozens of other members of his diocese reading the names and ages of the 16 Israeli children who died during the Oct. 7, 2023, attack by Hamas and the 12,211 names of the Palestinian children who have died following Israel's occupation of Gaza up until July 25, 2025. The names of the Israeli children were taken from Israeli government data, while the names of the Palestinian children were compiled by the Gaza Ministry of Health. The document was 469 pages long, which took roughly seven hours to read, starting in the afternoon and going until late in the evening.

The prayer took place in the park of Monte Sole di Marzabotto, not far from Zuppi's diocese in Bologna. The location was highly symbolic, since the prayer occurred in the ruins of the Church of Casaglia, burned by Nazis, who between Sept. 29 and Oct. 5, 1944, destroyed the area and killed almost 800 people, including children.

"This is to remember, to pay attention, from this place which is a place of suffering and that has since always been a place to remember all victims," Zuppi said.

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The initiative was organized by the monastic community of the Small Family of the Annunciation, which cares for the ruins of the Nazi attack and preserves its memory. The School of Peace at Monte Sole is an institution committed to promoting peace and tolerance.

"It is an insistent prayer so that the war may cease, so that the weapons may fall silent, so that humanity may prevail," the cardinal said.

Zuppi was selected by Pope Francis to be his peace envoy in Ukraine, where he used his experience as a peace mediator to help in the exchange of hostages between Russia and Ukraine and in reuniting Ukrainian children with their families. During the conclave that elected Pope Leo XIV, he was considered papabile, meaning a likely contender for the papacy.

Catholic leaders have been taking a strong stance against the war in Gaza in recent weeks as deaths escalate and the enclave faces starvation. The International Union of Superiors General, which brings together all the leaders of women's religious congregations, launched a day of fasting and prayer on Aug. 4, calling "for justice and reconciliation."

The Parish Priest of the only Catholic parish in Gaza, Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, in a video message on Aug. 14, said, "The situation continues to be very serious: there are bombings everywhere, and also deaths and destruction. The danger for the entire population causes great fear among civilians." The Holy Family Church in Gaza was bombed on July 13, killing two women who had taken refuge there.

The Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, commented on the growing death toll in Gaza during a Mass on Aug. 15 at the Benedictine Abbey of Abu Gosh, near Jerusalem. "The blood of the innocent in Gaza and the world is not forgotten," he said.

As Pope Leo XIV spoke to journalists upon his arrival to his summer residence at Castel Gandolfo on Aug. 13, he called for a ceasefire and an end to the violence.

"After all this time, what is the purpose of war? We must always seek dialogue, diplomatic efforts, not violence, not weapons," he said.