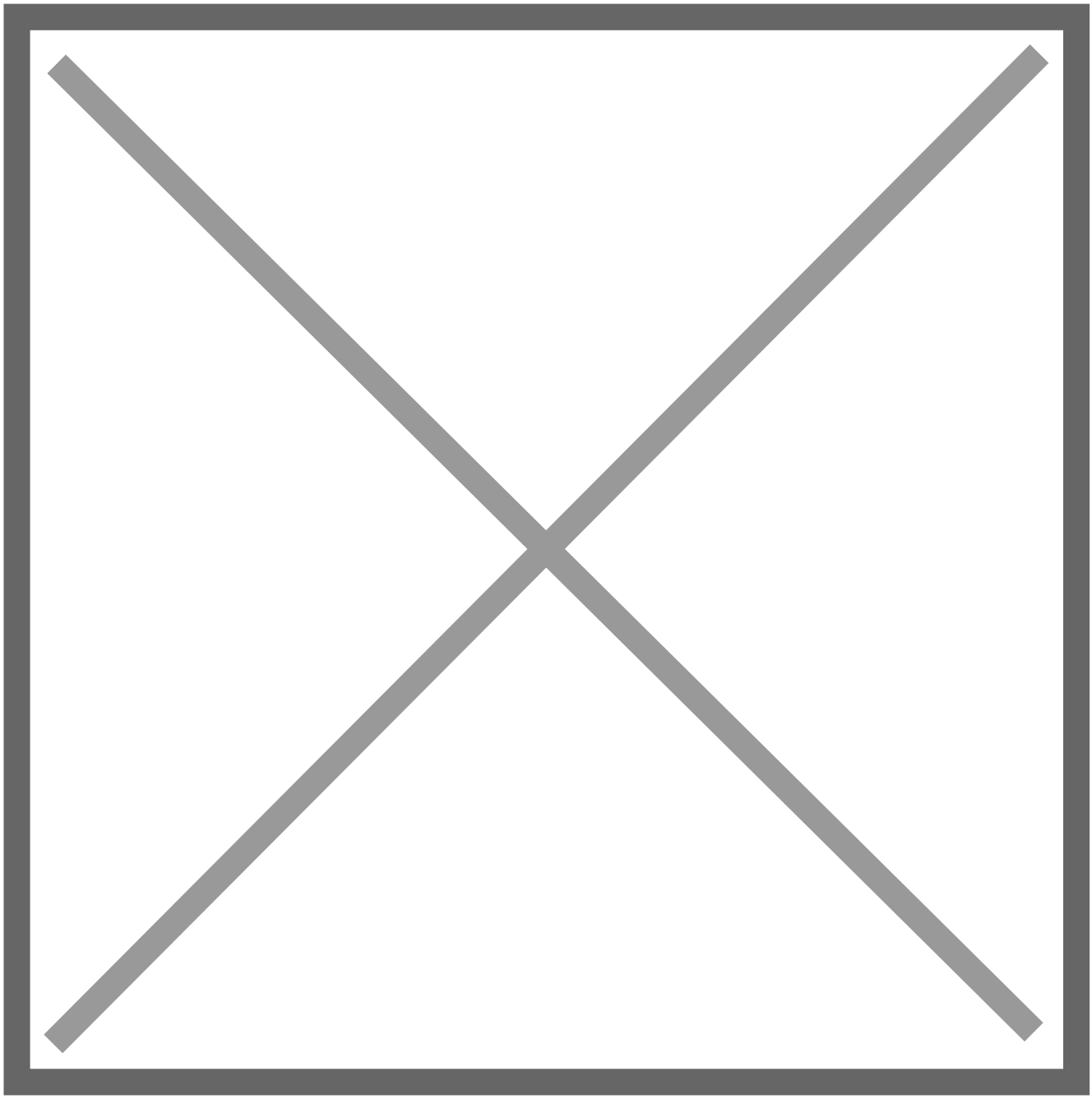
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Pope Leo XIV speaks with Cardinal Dominique Mathieu of Tehran-Ispahan, Iran, during a private meeting at the Vatican March 11, 2026. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Simone Risoluti)

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Pope Leo XIV met privately March 11 with the cardinal archbishop of Tehran after the Belgian-born prelate was evacuated from Iran amid U.S. and Israeli military strikes on the country.

Cardinal Dominique Mathieu, the Franciscan archbishop of Tehran and Isfahan, arrived in Rome March 8 as part of the complete evacuation of the Italian Embassy, where the archdiocese is headquartered. His meeting with the pope came on the same day Leo made a public appeal for peace before thousands of pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square.

"Dear brothers and sisters, let us continue to pray for peace in Iran and throughout the Middle East, especially for the many civilian victims, including many innocent children," the pope said at his Wednesday general audience.

Mathieu's whereabouts had been unknown for days after the U.S. and Israel launched joint strikes against Iran on Feb. 28, killing Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and several top officials.

In a brief statement to the Belgian Catholic news outlet Cathobel March 9, Mathieu said he had left "not without regret and sorrow for our brothers and sisters in Iran."

"While waiting to return, pray for the conversion of hearts to inner peace," Mathieu wrote.

The cardinal's departure from Tehran was tied to the closure of the Italian Embassy. Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani announced March 5 that the embassy would be temporarily shut, with a group of roughly 50 Italian nationals crossing into Azerbaijan. Embassy staff relocated to Baku, though Tajani said Italy was keeping diplomatic channels with Tehran open.

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Tehran's Cathedral of the Consolata, along with the cardinal's residence and administrative offices, sits on the Italian Embassy grounds, making the evacuation effectively inseparable from the church's own displacement.

Mathieu, a native of Belgium who joined the Franciscan order in 1983 and speaks five languages including Arabic, has previously expressed concern at the idea of "obtaining peace by force."

In an interview with OSV News in July, following the 12-day war between Israel and Iran, he cautioned that rising nationalist sentiment had produced "more barriers and increased armament, justified by fears of actual or potential attacks."

"It is troubling to hear the idea of 'obtaining peace by force,' where violence becomes the only means of addressing conflicts," he said at the time.

The current conflict, now in its second week, has extended beyond Iran. On March 9, a Maronite Catholic priest, Fr. Pierre al-Rahi, was killed by Israeli artillery fire in southern Lebanon.

Leo lauded the late al-Rahi during his Wednesday audience on March 11.

"Today in Qlayaa, Lebanon, the funeral of Fr. Pierre El Raii, Maronite parish priest of one of the Christian villages in southern Lebanon, is being celebrated. These villages are once again experiencing the tragedy of war. I am close to all the Lebanese people at this time of grave trial," the pope said.

Leo added that in Arabic, "El Raii" means "the shepherd."

"Fr. Pierre was a true shepherd, who always stayed beside his people, with the love and sacrifice of Jesus the Good Shepherd. As soon as he heard that some parishioners had been wounded in a bombing, he rushed to help them without

hesitation. May the Lord grant that the blood he shed be a seed of peace for beloved Lebanon," he said.

This story appears in the **War in Iran** feature series. View the full series.