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Analysis
Members of the military carry a transfer case during the dignified transfer of the remains of U

Members of the military carry a transfer case during the dignified transfer of the remains of U.S. Army Sgt. Benjamin Pennington at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware March 9. Pennington died on March 8 from injuries sustained during a March 1 attack at Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. The U.S. military says 13 U.S. service members have died in the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran. (OSV News/Kylie Cooper)



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Lent is a season of self-reflection and penance for Christians, and if you happen to be a political leader carrying out a war, especially one deemed unjust by senior church leaders, Pope Leo XIV hopes you'll use the next few weeks before Easter to examine your conscience.

Speaking to a group of priests and seminarians gathered at the Vatican to consider issues related to the sacrament of reconciliation, Leo said on March 13, "One might ask: do those Christians who bear serious responsibility in armed conflicts have the humility and courage to make a serious examination of conscience and to go to

confession?"

President Donald Trump isn't Catholic of course, but given the increasing number of casualties in Iran, not to mention the economic fallout, it's hard not to read in Leo's comments a subtle rebuke of the U.S. president and his aides, many of whom are Catholic.

Leo's rhetorical question is another example of his reserved, if pointed, approach to weighing in on global issues — particularly those concerning the United States. Earlier this week, NCR Vatican correspondent Justin McLellan noted that when it comes to the ongoing war against Iran, led by the United States and Israel, Leo relies on others, including U.S. bishops, to lay out the church's point of view.

> 'Do those Christians who bear serious responsibility in armed conflicts have the humility and courage to make a serious examination of conscience and to go to confession?'
> —Pope Leo XIV
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Still, the pope, and the Vatican more broadly, aren't shying away from controversial topics. Leo's question about conscience is simply the latest in his comments that point to the war in Iran, and L'Osservatore Romano, Vatican City's daily newspaper, has garnered praise for the way it has covered the war.

The front page March 12 features a bloodied blanket with the stark headline, "Giá 1.100 'danni collaterali,' " or, "Already 1,100 'collateral damage,' " referring to reports that more than 1,100 people had been killed since U.S. and Israeli strikes began on Feb. 28. (NPR reported March 13 that more than 1,300 people have been killed in Iran, 773 in Lebanon and 12 in Israel. The U.S. military says that 13 U.S. service members have died since fighting began.)

Earlier this month, L'Osservatore Romano featured an image showing freshly dug graves following the Feb. 28 bombing of an elementary school in Iran, with the headline, "Il volto della guerra," or "The face of war." Trump initially denied that the school was bombed by the United States, but a preliminary investigation by the U.S. military said that it was responsible. Iranian officials said that at least 175 people were killed, mostly children. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth said March 13 that

the Pentagon would open an investigation into the bombing.

Veteran Catholic journalist David Gibson, who heads the Fordham University Center on Religion and Culture, posted on X, "Vatican newspaper coverage continues to nail it."

While the pope's limited comments on Iran creates space for other church leaders to make the church's case, it also allows critics to argue that he simply isn't leading clearly.

Earlier this week, the Wall Street Journal's William McGurn published a column with the provocative headline, "Homilies Won't Liberate Iran," in which he takes issue with Leo's pronouncements on Iran, particularly for not engaging with the church's embrace of just war theory.

With supporters and critics alike yearning to hear more from Leo about the war in Iran, might he weigh in more forcefully?

As the war rages on — Hegseth also said that March 13 would be the most intense day of strikes yet — Leo will undoubtedly be pressed to offer his thoughts. In the meantime, between remarks from cardinals and the Vatican's own newspaper, it's becoming increasingly clear that the first U.S. pope thinks the U.S. president might need to examine his conscience.

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