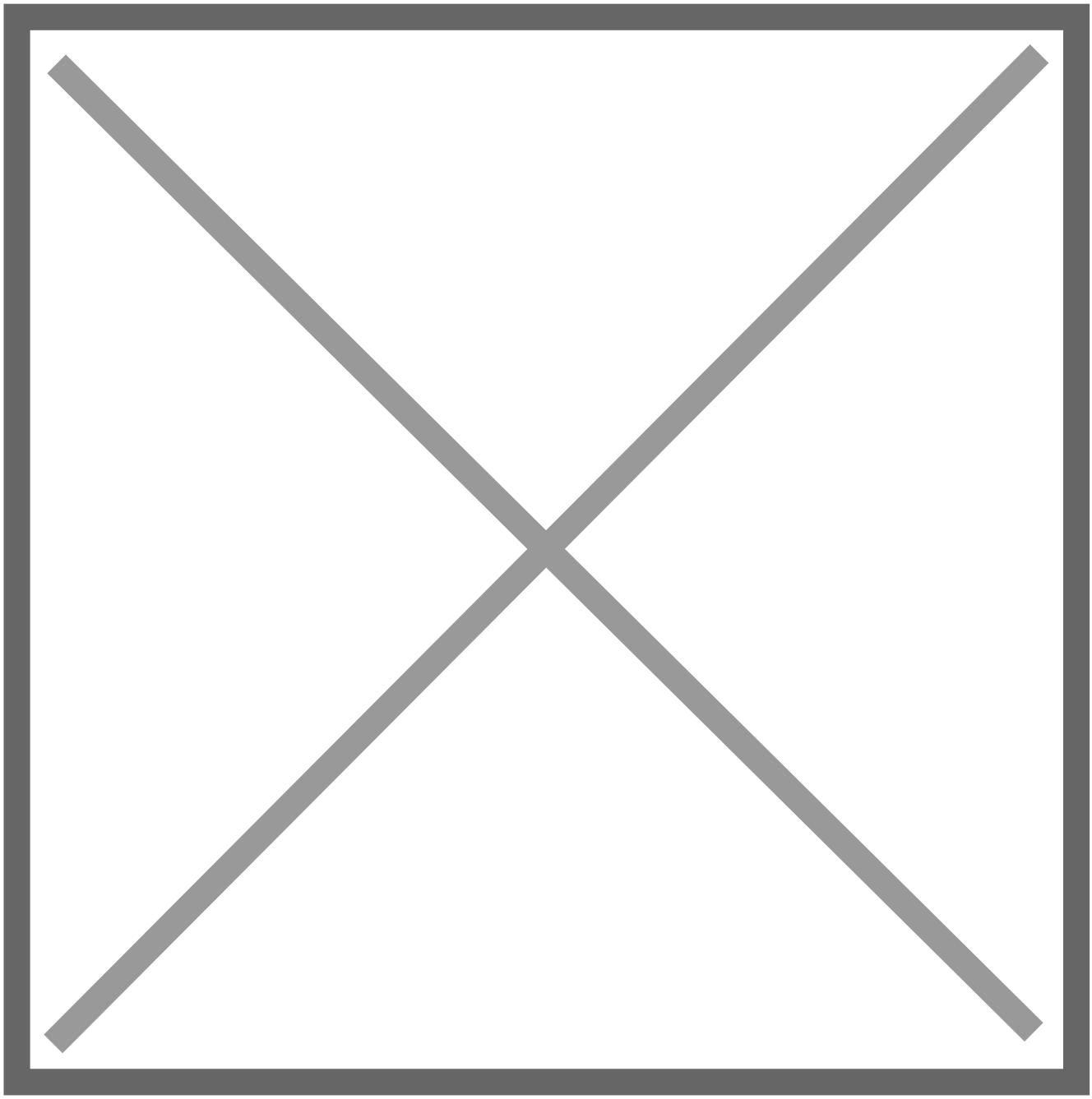
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Pope Leo XIV delivers a homily during the Palm Sunday Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, March 29, 2026. (OSV News/Remo Casilli, pool via Reuters)



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After a procession of palm leaves and olive branches through St. Peter's Square, Pope Leo XIV opened his first Holy Week as pope with a forceful appeal for peace at a time when the specter of war looms large on the world stage.

Preaching at Palm Sunday Mass, Leo described Jesus as the King of Peace "who rejects war" and "whom no one can use to justify war."

"He does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them," Leo said, quoting the prophet Isaiah, who said: "Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen: your hands are full of blood."

The pope's homily contrasted with rhetoric from Trump administration officials who in recent days have invoked religion to promote the United States and Israel's war with Iran.

Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, has called on the American people to pray for victory in the war "in the name of Jesus Christ," and, again invoking Jesus' name, prayed for U.S. troops to inflict “overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy."

Related: Full text: Pope Leo XIV's first Palm Sunday homily

At the close of the Mass, the pope turned his attention to Christians in the Middle East, who he said "are suffering the consequences of an brutal conflict" and are unable to fully celebrate the rites of Holy Week.

The pope's message came as the traditional Palm Sunday procession from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem was canceled due to the war in the Middle East; Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa of Jerusalem said the ongoing war adds the "burden of not being able to celebrate Easter together and with dignity."

Leo closed Palm Sunday Mass stating that during Holy Week, "Just as the Church contemplates the mystery of the Lord’s Passion, we cannot forget those who today are truly sharing in his suffering."

"Their ordeal challenges all our consciences," he said.

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Leo likewise in his homily recalled how people's pain and suffering is reflected in the crucified Christ.

"In his last cry to the Father, we hear the weeping of those who are crushed, who have no hope, who are sick and who are alone," he said. "Above all, we hear the painful groans of all those who are oppressed by violence and are victims of war."

In the crowd, the faithful held some 120,000 olive branches, a symbol of peace, brought to St. Peter's Square from the nearby Umbria region in keeping with the Italian custom of blessing the branches during Palm Sunday Mass.

The previous day, the pope had traveled for a daylong trip to Monaco, the second international trip of his pontificate, where he called for peace in a world where "the wars that stain it with blood are the fruit of the idolatry of power and money."

The pope will have many more opportunities in the coming days to drive home his message of peace. Attention is likely to turn to the traditional Way of the Cross service at Rome’s Colosseum, where the choice of who writes the meditations for the service often signals a pope’s pastoral priorities.

Previous popes used the occasion to highlight global plights – Pope Francis has refugees, trafficking survivors and Christians from war-torn regions write the meditations when he presided over the service.

Leo's selection will offer an indication of how he intends to frame the church's witness amid today's conflicts.

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