News

An Ethiopian Christian woman prays before the closed doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulc

An Ethiopian Christian woman prays before the closed doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City of Jerusalem on March 4, 2026, the fifth day of the war between the United States and Israel against Iran. (OSV News/Debbie Hill)

Junno Arocho Esteves

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 30, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said an agreement has been reached with Israeli authorities to allow Holy Week and Easter celebrations to take place at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher after they were initially barred from celebrating Palm Sunday.

In a statement published March 30, the patriarchate said that "access for representatives of the Churches has been secured in order to conduct the liturgies and ceremonies and to preserve the ancient Easter traditions at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher."

"Naturally, and in light of the current state of war, the existing restrictions on public gatherings remain in force for the time being. Accordingly, the Churches will ensure that the liturgies and prayers are broadcast live to the faithful in the Holy Land and throughout the world," the statement read.

The agreement was reached a day after Israeli police barred Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, and Fr. Francesco Ielpo, the custos of the Holy Land, from entering the church March 29, drawing global condemnation.

In a statement published shortly after the incident, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said barring Catholic leaders from celebrating the start of Holy Week set "a grave precedent, and disregards the sensibilities of billions of people around the world who, during this week, look to Jerusalem."

Following the backlash, Israeli President Isaac Herzog said he called Pizzaballa to "express my great sorrow over this morning's unfortunate incident in the Old City of Jerusalem."

"I clarified that the incident stemmed from security concerns due to the continuous threat of missile attacks from the Iranian terror regime against the civilian population in Israel, following previous incidents in which Iranian missiles fell in the area of the Old City of Jerusalem in recent days," he explained.

Herzog also reaffirmed Israel's "unwavering commitment to freedom of religion for all faiths and to upholding the status quo at the holy sites of Jerusalem."

In its March 30 statement, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem expressed its gratitude to Herzog "for his prompt attention and valued intervention."

"We also extend our appreciation to the Heads of State and officials who acted swiftly to convey their firm positions, many of whom personally reached out to express their closeness and support," it said.

Swift reactions

Religious and political leaders worldwide swiftly denounced Israeli authorities after the news quickly spread March 29 that entrance to the church had been barred for the two Catholic leaders.

The X account of Palestine's mission to the United Nations said the Israeli authorities' actions against religious leaders were not without precedent, as "for decades, Israel has always denied Palestinian Christians access to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher with full impunity."

In a subsequent post, Palestinian government authorities said the barring of church leaders from performing their religious rites "constitutes a crime and an illegal military measure, and represents a flagrant violation of the basic rights of the Palestinian people, foremost among them freedom of worship."

The Israeli police's actions, it added, show disregard for "the sentiments of hundreds of millions of people around the world, and an affront to the feelings of Christians and Muslims who share in the sanctity of the city of Jerusalem and its religious and historical status, and a violation of the current legal and historical status quo."

Prominent Western leaders also took to social media to denounce the incident.

Among the immediate reactions were from Italy, where the country's foreign minister, Antonio Tajani, called the incident "unacceptable" and announced that he had summoned Israel's ambassador to Italy "to receive clarifications on the decision to prevent Cardinal Pizzaballa from celebrating Palm Sunday."

Mike Huckabee, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, issued a rare condemnation, acknowledging that while holy sites in the Old City of Jerusalem were closed due to safety concerns, preventing Catholic leaders from entering the church was "an unfortunate overreach [that is] already having major repercussions around the world."

"Home Front Command Guidelines restrict any gatherings to 50 people or less. The 4 representatives of the Catholic Church were well below that restriction," he wrote. "For the Patriarch to be barred from entry to the Church on Palm Sunday for a private ceremony is difficult to understand or justify."

In posts in French, Hebrew and Arabic, French President Emmanuel Macron expressed his support for Pizzaballa and Christians in the Holy Land, saying that the "free exercise of worship in Jerusalem must be guaranteed for all religions.

"I condemn this decision by the Israeli police, which adds to the alarming proliferation of violations of the status quo of Jerusalem’s Holy Sites," he wrote.

Advertisement

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who has criticized the U.S.- and Israel-led war against Iran, directly blamed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the incident, saying he "prevented Catholics from celebrating Palm Sunday in Jerusalem's Holy Places. Without any explanation. Without reasons or motives."

"The government of Spain condemns this unjustified attack on religious freedom and demands that Israel respect the diversity of beliefs and international law. Because without tolerance, coexistence is impossible," he wrote.

Kaja Kallas, the European Union's foreign policy chief, said barring Pizzaballa and Ielpo from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulcher constituted "a violation of religious freedom and long-standing protections governing holy sites."

"Freedom of worship in Jerusalem must be fully guaranteed, without exception, for all faiths," she wrote on X. "Jerusalem's multi-religious character must be protected."

Polish President Karol Nawrocki also took to X to say that he strongly objects to "the refusal to allow the celebration of Holy Mass at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem."

"Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, and Christians are preparing for the resurrection of Jesus Christ," wrote the Polish president, who is Catholic.

"The actions of the Israeli police, which I condemn, are an expression of disrespect for Christian tradition and culture."

Traditional allies of Netanyahu also offered rare criticisms, including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who called the situation "painful."

"This is unacceptable for us as Christians, even taking into account the wartime situation and general security measures," he wrote. "We must not allow war to exclude followers of any religion from our shared holy city, Jerusalem."

Easing tensions

Responding to the incident in a series of tweets, Israel's prime minister's office noted that Iran "has repeatedly targeted the holy sites of all three monotheistic religions in Jerusalem with ballistic missiles" and that missile fragments from one strike crashed

near the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

The police, he said, prevented Pizzaballa and Ielpo from entering the church "out of special concern for his safety" and that "there was no malicious intent."

"However, given the holiness of the week leading up to Easter for the world’s Christians, Israel's security arms are putting together a plan to enable church leaders to worship at the holy site in the coming days."

Several hours later, in a post on his personal X account, Netanyahu said he instructed authorities that Pizzaballa "be granted full and immediate access to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem."

"Even though I understand this concern, as soon as I learned about the incident with Cardinal Pizzaballa, I instructed the authorities to enable the Patriarch to hold services as he wishes," he wrote.

Responding to Netanyahu's post, Huckabee said he was glad Netanyahu "personally and promptly intervened to allow Cardinal Pizzaballa access to Church of Holy Sepulcher."

"ALL holy sites have restrictions due to Iranian missiles and safety issues, but private access on Palm Sunday was reasonable and the issue now resolved," the U.S. ambassador tweeted.

Pizzaballa also sought to ease tensions in the aftermath of the incident. In an interview with TV2000, the television network owned by the Italian bishops’ conference, the Latin patriarch said the incident was the result of a "misunderstanding."

"There were no clashes; everything was done very politely. I don't want to force things; we want to use this situation to better clarify in the coming days what to do, respecting everyone's safety but also respecting the right to prayer," he said.

He also noted that while the Palm Sunday incident was important, it must also be considered within "the broader context."

"There are people who are much worse off than we are and cannot celebrate for very different reasons," he said. "Once again, we are celebrating a subdued Easter."