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Pope Leo XIV talks to journalists as he leaves his residence in Castel Gandolfo, on the outskirts of Rome, to return to the Vatican, Tuesday, March 31, 2026. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

by Associated Press

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Pope Leo XIV expressed hope that the U.S.-Israel war on Iran could be finished before Easter in remarks to reporters as he left the papal retreat at Castel Gandolfo outside of Rome on Tuesday.

"I'm told that President Trump has recently stated that he would like to end the war,'' the U.S.-born pope said. "I hope that he's looking for an off-ramp.''

"Hopefully he's looking for a way to decrease the amount of violence, of bombing, which would be a significant contribution to removing the hatred that's being created, that's increasing constantly in the Middle East and elsewhere."

Leo called on all world leaders to return to dialogue and look for "ways to reduce the amount of violence,'' so that "peace, especially at Easter, might reign in our hearts.''

Leo's remarks came during Holy Week, the most sacred period of the year for Christians.

"It should be the holiest time of the year. It is a time of peace, a time of reflection. But as we all know, again, in the world, in many places we are seeing so much suffering, so many deaths, even innocent children,'' Leo said. "We constantly make the call for peace, but unfortunately, many people want to promote hatred, violence, war.''

On Palm Sunday, the pontiff said God doesn't listen to the prayers of those who make war or cite God to justify their violence, as he prayed especially for Christians in the Middle East during Mass in St. Peter's Square.

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Leaders on all sides of the Iran war have used religion to justify their actions. U.S. officials, especially Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, have invoked their Christian faith to cast the war as a Christian nation trying to vanquish its foes with military might.

Russia's Orthodox Church, too, has justified Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a "holy war" against a Western world it considers has fallen into evil.

As Holy Week continues, Leo will carry out the Holy Thursday foot-washing tradition in the basilica of St. John Lateran, where popes have performed it for decades. On Friday, Leo is due to preside over the Good Friday procession at Rome's Colosseum commemorating Christ's Passion and crucifixion, and will carry the cross himself. Saturday brings the late night Easter Vigil, during which Leo will baptize new Catholics, followed a few hours later by Easter Sunday when Christians commemorate the resurrection of Jesus.

Leo will celebrate Easter Sunday Mass in St. Peter's Square and then deliver his Easter blessing from the loggia of the basilica.