News

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A priest walks on the Via Dolorosa on Good Friday, in the Old City of Jerusalem, April 3, 2026. Israeli security forces stopped Christians from reaching the Via Dolorosa, while allowing Muslims and Jews passage to the area. Border police said the safety precautions were because of the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran. (OSV News/Debbie Hill)

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Holy Week in the Holy Land is unfolding in unprecedented silence, as war-related restrictions have left sacred sites largely without the faithful.

Israeli authorities, citing security concerns amid the U.S. and Israel-Iran war, have limited access to major liturgies, including those at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, where a handful of friars led by Holy Land's patriarchs celebrated Holy Thursday and Good Friday liturgies.

"Unable to celebrate the great liturgies of the Paschal Triduum" in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, "due to the limitations imposed in these days, the different religious communities present in Jerusalem organized more intimate celebrations in their own churches and in the places entrusted to their care," Custody of the Holy Land said in

an April 2 statement.

The friars of the Custody of the Holy Land, guided by the custos, Italian Fr. Francesco Ielpo, started the Sacred Triduum at the Basilica of Gethsemane, "in the place where the Lord began His Passion with prayer and trustful abandonment to the Father."

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa prays at the Holy Sepulchre, the tomb where Christ's body wa

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa prays at the Holy Sepulchre, the tomb where Christ's body was laid after his crucifixion and before the resurrection, as he celebrated Mass of the Lord's Supper in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher April 2 in Jerusalem. (OSV News/Courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)

After a major diplomatic incident that prevented him from entering the holy site on March 29 to celebrate Palm Sunday Mass, access was granted for Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and he was able to celebrate the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper and wash the feet of priests present for the mandatum.

"We are in the place where a stone once sealed death," he told a small gathering, mostly of Franciscan friars and those working within the Latin patriarchate's offices. "And yet today we are here to celebrate life. There is a tension we cannot ignore: outside, the doors of the Holy Sepulchre are closed. War has turned this place into a refuge, an 'inside' cut off from an 'outside' weighed down by fear and strain," the cardinal said.

"We are here as within a womb of peace, while the world around us is being torn apart, and we wish we could change all of this," the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem said.

With the gesture of the washing of the feet, Pizzaballa said, Jesus bends down, and "Peter cannot accept a Lord who bends down."

By saying "If you do not accept this, you will no longer belong to me," Pizzaballa said Jesus uses the language of "communion."

A nun prays before the Good Friday service in St. Saviour Monastery in the Old City of Jerusal

A nun prays before the Good Friday service in St. Saviour Monastery in the Old City of Jerusalem, April 3. Israeli security forces stopped Christians from reaching the Via

Dolorosa, while allowing Muslims and Jews passage to the area. Border police said the safety precautions were because of the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran. (OSV News/Debbie Hill)

"Jesus' reply is even more uncompromising, and it is one of the most severe statements in the Gospel: 'Unless I wash you, you will have no part with me' (John 13:8)," the cardinal said, explaining what the Lord meant: "Peter, you may admire me, you may follow me, you may even defend me — but if you do not accept this way of loving, you will not enter into my passage. You will not share in my Passover," he said.

"Here lies the decisive point of this liturgy: Easter is not something Jesus does for us without us. It is something we can experience only with Him. And to live with Him, we must embrace His way of loving. There is no communion without that embrace."

The Eucharist, he said "cannot be separated from the washing of the feet. They are not two different moments; they are two expressions of the same love. The body broken on the altar is the same body that kneels before the disciples. If we separate the two, we lose the meaning of both."

"To have a part" in the Lord's passage "resonates in a particular way for us, the Church of the Holy Land," the Latin patriarch said April 2 to a handful of friars celebrating in what the patriarch called a "lifeless" Jerusalem at a press conference March 31.

"We are not a strong Church, nor a large one, nor a Church that can afford easy paths, and we experience this constantly. We are often a weary Church, a Church put to the test, at times tempted to defend itself rather than to give itself," he emphasized during the Mass of the Lord's Supper.

"And yet today the Lord does not ask us to be powerful, but to share in his life. He does not ask us to resolve everything, but not to reject his way of loving. For the Church shares in Christ not when it is secure, but when it accepts to share in his selflowering," the patriarch said.

Israeli police stop Palestinian Catholics Yosef Kamar and his family from reaching the closed d

Israeli police stop Palestinian Catholics Yosef Kamar and his family from reaching the closed door of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on Good Friday, in the Old City of

Jerusalem, April 3. (OSV News/Debbie Hill)

"To have a part with him, for us who live and bear witness to the Gospel in this land, means learning the language of humility, the language of bending down," he said, listing "bending down to fears, to misunderstandings, to the daily burdens of those who risk losing hope."

He said part of bending down is the opposite of "claiming to have immediate solutions" -- instead, people of the Holy Land should offer "a faithful presence."

"Perhaps we cannot change the great movements of history, but we can decide whether to stand with Christ in his way of being within history: not above it, not against it, but alongside it."

War circumstances are hitting hard Catholic communities across the Holy Land, not only in Jerusalem. In Dubai, in-person celebrations of the Triduum were canceled, with parishes citing government directives amid the ongoing war.

St. Mary's Catholic Church announced in an April 3 Facebook post that it would be "closed to all visitors until further notice." The church said only its evening Good Friday service, scheduled for 6 p.m., would be livestreamed on the parish's YouTube channel.

St. Francis of Assisi Church said on its website that its Masses were "cancelled until further notice," effective April 3.

"Parishioners are requested to refrain from visiting the Church premises, in the interest of safety and community well-being," said the parish in its message, adding that it would not provide any livestreaming of its liturgies.

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According to The Associated Press, on April 3 an Iranian state TV affiliate reported that a U.S. pilot ejected from a fighter jet over southwestern Iran on April 2, while footage showed American aircraft flying over mountainous terrain. A TV anchor urged citizens to hand over any "enemy pilot" to authorities in exchange for a "precious prize." The U.S. military launched a rescue operation, AP said.

The report came amid escalating conflict, including a major explosion in Tehran and Iranian strikes across the region, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying Israel and the U.S. will continue to "crush Iran," according to the BBC.

In Jerusalem, on Good Friday April 3, before the Way of the Cross, Pizzaballa prayed with friars the solemn Office of the Passion of the Lord (Officium Passionis Domini), celebrated at Calvary in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, in Jerusalem.

The Calvary is "the very site where Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and rose from the dead," Christian Media Center of the Custody of the Holy Land said in a post attached to the livestream of the event.

Calvary (Golgotha) and the Holy Tomb are enshrined within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, "making this celebration a uniquely powerful act of faith at the heart of the Holy Land," the site said.

Christian Media Center livestreams all events of Holy Week, according to its mission: "to bring the Holy Land in its religious and cultural diversity to Christians all over the world."

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