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### **Pope Francis' pontificate of peace, for peace.**

We remember Pope Francis as a Pope of peace through his tireless appeals and constant visits to show his closeness to those suffering the consequences of one of the most unjust human-made disasters: war.

By Francesca Merlo

At his last public appearance, Pope Francis repeated what had become a slogan in his pontificate of peace. Everyone knew to expect it at the end of his audiences, but never did it lose its strength. During the Easter Urbi et Orbi blessing, the day before he died, the Pope's words echoed the countless appeals he had made over the years, urging world leaders to lay down arms and turn to dialogue. Even as he struggled to speak, having asked someone to read his message on his behalf, his voice, albeit weak, resonated across St Peter's Square and screens across the world. From the first days of his 12-year-long pontificate, Pope Francis spearheaded the global Catholic movement for peace advocacy. Through words, actions, and deeds, he demonstrated his unshakable belief in the power of reconciliation, the importance of dialogue, and the urgency of ending violence in all its forms.

### **Words and actions.**

Dubbed "the Pope of the peripheries," Pope Francis always took the time to remember those suffering from conflict. While praying for peace in areas that gain most of the media attention, he also never failed to channel his prayers to some of the areas most hard-hit, yet most forgotten by the world. One of his most symbolic gestures, and a particularly striking moment of his pontificate, was in April 2019, when he knelt to kiss the feet of South Sudanese leaders at the head of a country grappling with a horrific civil war. As he greeted President Salva Kiir and his rival Riek Machar in the Vatican, the Pope, in his humility, kissed their feet, urging the leaders to lay down their weapons and pursue paths of peace. His personal plea turned diplomatic when, four years later, in February 2023, he traveled to South Sudan. Along with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, he warmly addressed thousands of faithful who had suffered

and continued to endure the brutal consequences of war. Then, as he addressed the nation's authorities, civil society and diplomatic corps at the Presidential Palace in Juba, he warned them: "Future generations will either venerate your names or cancel their memory, based on what you now do". His cry for peace also looked to the legacy of wars past, the scars inflicted by the violent atrocities committed between nations and peoples, and ensuring that certain mistakes are never repeated. During his visit to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in November 2019, Pope Francis delivered a powerful plea against nuclear weapons.

Standing at the Atomic Bomb Hypocentre Park in Nagasaki, on the same ground where atomic bombs had caused unprecedented destruction, he condemned the devastation caused by such arms and all who possess them, declaring, "The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possession of nuclear weapons is immoral."

Pope Francis consistently sought to address the roots of destruction, urging those in positions of power to take responsibility. His advocacy for denuclearization was essential in this. So often, Pope Francis denounced the arms trade, repeatedly condemning those who profit from war. Addressing the United States Congress on 24 September 2015, he posed a haunting question: "Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society? Sadly, the answer, as we all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood."

He described the investment of money in weapons as 'madness' and decried the debt linked to the "black market" of arms. As the world entered 2025, his message remained as urgent as ever: "Stop colonizing people with weapons!"

### **Pilgrimages of peace.**

Just as South Sudan was, many more of Pope Francis' apostolic journeys were dedicated to peace. In March 2021, he made history as the first pope to travel to Iraq. There, he brought a message of unity and hope to a nation devastated by years of conflict. In particular, his meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf underscored the power of interreligious dialogue and mutual respect, and led to Pope Francis' statement that "Peace does not demand winners or losers, but brothers and sisters who, despite misunderstandings and past wounds, choose the path of dialogue."

Most recently, in September 2024, Pope Francis visited East Timor, a young nation that fought long and hard for independence. His presence was a fierce sign of closeness to the most Catholic nation in the world, which struggled so long for freedom and is still healing from its past. There, as he celebrated Mass at Tasitolu for 600,000 people, the Pope reminded those present that “You remained firm in hope even amid affliction, and, thanks to the character of your people and your faith, you have turned sorrow into joy”.

### **Diplomatic appeals and ceasefire calls.**

Beyond his travels, Pope Francis has used his voice to intervene in global conflicts, appealing tirelessly for ceasefires and negotiations. In May 2014, Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas met with him in the Vatican for a prayer summit, demonstrating his belief that prayer and dialogue could pave the way for peace. Since then, as violence continued to escalate in the Middle East, in October 2024, Pope Francis made an impassioned plea for a ceasefire in Gaza, the release of Israeli hostages and humanitarian access to those in need across the region.

In that same month, after one year of Israeli offensive in Gaza, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and former Palestinian Minister for Foreign Affairs Nasser Al-Kidwa presented Pope Francis with their peace proposal for the war devastating their nations.

### **The unwavering voice of a peacemaker.**

The Pope’s closeness to those who suffer and his advocacy for an end to global violence were always a priority. Even in moments of personal difficulty, Pope Francis remained committed to peace. In his final weeks, throughout his hospitalization for bilateral pneumonia, Pope Francis took the time to video chat with the Holy Family parish in Gaza, with whom he has been in close contact throughout the entirety of the Israeli offensive.

In this Holy Year dedicated to Hope, Pope Francis’ messages, closeness, and care for peace are a legacy that will continue to resonate throughout the future of the Church and humanity, remembering that his was not just a cry for an absence of war, but for the presence of justice, dialogue, and fraternity - for a world that is for everyone and not just for some, and in which those who have more never, ever forget those who have less.