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Letter of Pope Francis to Catholics in the Middle East

Dear brothers and sisters,

I am thinking of you and praying for you. I want to reach out to you on this sad day. A year ago, the fuse of hatred was lit; it did not sputter, but exploded in a spiral of violence, in the shameful inability of the international community and the most powerful countries to silence the weapons and put an end to the tragedy of war. Blood is still being shed, as are tears. Anger is growing, along with the desire for revenge, while it seems that few people care about what is most needed and what is most desired: dialogue and peace. I never tire of repeating that war is a defeat, that weapons do not build the future but destroy it, that violence never brings peace. History proves this, yet years and years of conflict seem to have taught us nothing.

And you, brothers and sisters in Christ who dwell in the lands of which the Scriptures speak most often, are a small, defenceless flock, thirsting for peace. Thank you for what you are, thank you for wanting to remain in your lands, thank you for being able to pray and love despite everything. You are a seed loved by God. Just as a seed, apparently pressed down by the earth that covers it, is always able to find its way upwards, towards the light, in order to bear fruit and give life, do not let yourselves be engulfed by the darkness that surrounds you. Planted in your sacred lands, become sprouts of hope, because the light of faith leads you to testify to love amid words of hatred, to encounter amid growing confrontation, to unity amid increasing hostility.

With the heart of a father, I write to you, God's holy people, children of your ancient Churches, today experiencing a real "martyrdom", seeds of peace amid the winter of war, believers in Jesus who is "gentle and humble of heart" (*Mt* 11:29) and, in him, witnesses to the power of a non-violent peace.

People today do not know how to find peace. As Christians, we must never tire of imploring peace from God. That is why, on this day, I have urged everyone to observe a day of prayer and fasting. Prayer and fasting are the weapons of love that change history, the weapons that defeat our one true enemy: the spirit of evil that foments war, because it is "murderous from the beginning", "a liar and the father of lies" (*Jn* 8:44). Please, let us devote time to prayer and rediscover the saving power of fasting!

There is one thing that I wish to say to you, from the bottom of my heart, dear brothers and sisters, but also to

the men and women of every confession and religion who in the Middle East are suffering from the insanity of war: I am close to you, I am with you.

I am with you, the people of Gaza, long embattled and in dire straits. You are in my thoughts and prayers daily.

I am with you, who have been forced to leave your homes, to abandon schooling and work and to find a place of refuge from the bombing.

I am with you, the mothers who weep while looking at your dead or wounded children, like Mary at the sight of Jesus; with you, the children of the great lands of the Middle East, where the intrigues of those in power deprive you of your right to play.

I am with you, who are afraid to look up for fear of fire raining down from the skies.

I am with you, who have no voice, for despite all the talk of plans and strategies, there is little concern for those who suffer the devastation of war, which the powerful impose on others; yet they will be subject to the inflexible judgement of God (cf. *Wis6:8*).

I am with you, who thirst for peace and justice, and refuse to yield to the logic of evil and, in the name of Jesus, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (*Mt 5:44*).

Thank you, sons and daughters of peace, for consoling the heart of God, wounded by the evil of humanity. I also thank those throughout the world who assist you. I ask them, who in you care for Christ himself in the hungry, the sick, the stranger, the outcast, the poor and the needy, to continue to do so with generosity. Thank you, brother bishops and priests, who bring God’s consolation to those who feel alone and abandoned. Please look to the holy people you are called to serve and let your hearts be touched, putting aside, for the sake of your flock, all division and ambition.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, I bless you and embrace you with heartfelt affection. May Our Lady, Queen of Peace, watch over you. May Saint Joseph, Patron of the Church, protect you.

Faternally,

FRANCIS

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 7 October 2024
