

Letter of the Holy Father to the Catholics of the Holy Land

Dear brothers and sisters,

For some time, you have daily been in my thoughts and prayers. Now, on the eve of this Easter that for you is so overshadowed by the Passion and, as yet, so little by the Resurrection, I feel the desire to write to you and to tell you how close you are to my heart. I embrace all of you, in the variety of your rites, dear Catholic faithful living throughout the Holy Land. In a particular way, I embrace those most affected by the senseless tragedy of war: the children robbed of their future, those who grieve and are in pain, and all who find themselves prey to anguish and dismay.

Easter, the heart of our faith, is all the more significant for you who celebrate this feast in the very places where our Lord lived, died and rose again. The history of salvation, and indeed its geography, would not exist apart from the land in which you have dwelt for centuries. There you want to remain, and there it is good that you should remain. Thank you for your testimony of faith, thank you for the charity that exists among you, thank you for your ability to hope against all hope.

I would like each of you to feel my paternal affection, for I am conscious of your sufferings and your struggles, particularly in the course of these recent months. Together with my affection, may you sense the love of Catholics throughout the world! May the Lord Jesus, our Life, like the Good Samaritan, pour over your wounds in body and soul the balm of his consolation and the wine of hope.

I think back on the pilgrimage I made among you ten years ago, and I would like to make my own the words that, fifty years ago, Saint Paul VI – the first Successor of Peter to travel as a pilgrim to the Holy Land – addressed to the faithful everywhere: “The continuing tensions in the Middle East, and the lack of concrete progress towards peace, represent a constant and dire threat not only to the peace and security of those peoples – and indeed of the entire world – but also to values supremely dear, for different reasons, to much of mankind” (Apostolic Exhortation *Nobis in Animo*).

Dear brothers and sisters, the Christian community of the Holy Land has not only acted, down the centuries, as a guardian of the places of our salvation, but has likewise borne enduring witness, through its own sufferings, to the mystery of the Lord’s Passion. By your ability to rise anew and press forward, you have proclaimed, and continue to proclaim, that the crucified Lord rose from the dead; bearing the marks of his Passion, he then appeared to his disciples and ascended to heaven to bring before the Father our tormented yet now redeemed humanity. In these bleak times, when it seems that the dark clouds of Good Friday hover over your land, and all too many parts of our world are scarred by the pointless folly of war – which is always and for everyone a bitter defeat – you are lamps shining in the night, seeds of goodness in a land rent asunder by conflict.

For you and with you, I lift up this prayer: “Lord, you are our peace (cf. Eph 2:14-22). You who proclaimed blessed the peacemakers (cf. Mt 5:9): set human hearts free from hatred, violence and the spirit of revenge. We look to your example and we follow you, who are merciful, meek and humble of heart (cf. Mt 11:29). May no one rob our hearts of the hope of rising anew with you. May we never tire of defending the dignity of every man, woman and child, without distinction of religion, ethnicity or nationality, beginning with the most vulnerable among us: women, the elderly, children and the poor”.

Dear brothers and sisters, allow me to tell you once more that you are not alone; we will never leave you alone, but will demonstrate our solidarity with you by prayer and practical charity. Soon we hope to return among you as pilgrims, to draw near to you, to embrace you, to break with you the bread of fraternity and to contemplate the tender shoots of hope that spring from the seeds you are sowing in pain and nurturing with patience.

I know that your bishops, priests and religious are always at your side. I thank them most heartily for all that they have done and for all they are continuing to do. In the crucible of suffering, may the precious gold of unity be purified and shine forth, among yourselves and with our brothers and sisters of other Christian confessions. To them also, I want to express my spiritual closeness and encouragement. I keep all of you in my prayers.

I bless you and I invoke upon you the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, daughter of your land. Once more, I ask Christians throughout the world to manifest their concrete support for you and to pray tirelessly that all the people of your beloved land may dwell at last in peace.

Faternally,

Rome, from Saint John Lateran, Holy Week 2024

FRANCIS