



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on September 9, 2013

Pope Leads Prayer Vigil for Peace in Middle East

During his Sunday [Angelus](#) address in St. Peter's Square, Pope Francis (shown) [made an appeal for peace](#) in Syria and across the entire Middle East.



Speaking after the traditional noontime prayer, the pope thanked those who had joined in the Vigil of Prayer and Fasting Saturday evening and expressed his "gratitude to the civil authorities, as well as to the members of other Christian communities and of other religions, and to men and women of good will who have undertaken, on this occasion, periods of prayer, fasting and reflection."

More specifically turning to the crisis in Syria, Francis continued: "I invite you to continue to pray so that the violence and devastation in Syria may cease immediately and that a renewed effort be undertaken to achieve a just solution to this fratricidal conflict."

The pope also asked for prayers for other countries in the Middle East, particularly for stability in Lebanon, for an end to sectarian violence in Iraq, for the success of the peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians, and "that all Egyptians, Muslims and Christians, may commit themselves to build up together a society dedicated to the good of the whole population."

On Saturday, the pope conducted a five-hour evening [prayer vigil](#) for Syria in St. Peter's Square that was attended by an estimated 100,000 people. He had also asked that people around the world, whatever their religious convictions, make Saturday a day of fasting and prayer for peace. He said during the vigil:

This evening, I ask the Lord that we Christians, and our brothers and sisters of other religions and every man and woman of good will, cry out forcefully: Violence and war are never the way to peace!

May the noise of weapons cease! War always marks the failure of peace, it is always a defeat for humanity.

A report in the [Huffington Post](#) noted that Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III Laham of Antioch and All East presided at a service in Damascus. A few dozen Syrian Christians attended a service at in the al-Zaytoun Church, in Damascus, Syria, in response to the pope's invitation.

"This is the start of the victory," the patriarch said. "No to war. Yes for peace."

Two days earlier, [Time.com](#) reported that Pope Francis had written a letter to Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#), host of last week's G-20 summit in St. Petersburg, Russia, urging the world leaders attending the summit (including President Obama) to oppose military intervention in Syria.

"To the leaders present, to each and every one, I make a heartfelt appeal for them to help find ways to overcome the conflicting positions and to lay aside the futile pursuit of a military solution," pleaded the pope. "Rather, let there be a renewed commitment to seek, with courage and determination, a peaceful



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solution through dialogue and negotiation of the parties, unanimously supported by the international community.”

The reported noted that Francis also used Twitter to counsel against war in Syria, tweeting on September 2: “War never again! Never again war!” He also tweeted: “How much suffering, how much devastation, how much pain has the use of arms carried in its wake.” On September 3, he tweeted “We want in our society, torn apart by divisions and conflict, that peace break out!” and “With utmost firmness I condemn the use of chemical weapons.” He followed with another message on September 5: “With all my strength, I ask each party in the conflict not to close themselves in solely on their own interests. #prayforpeace.”

Time.com also reported that New York Archbishop Timothy Cardinal Dolan and leaders of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote to every member of Congress on September 5, urging them to vote against military intervention in Syria.

An AFP report carried by Australia’s [Herald Sun](#) newspaper noted the reaction to the pope’s plea for peace throughout the world, including favorable response from non-Catholics and even non-Christians:

- Syria’s Sunni Muslim leader, Grand Mufti Ahmed Badreddin Hassoun, called for Syrians to join in the prayers.
- The patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, spiritual leader of the world’s Orthodox, also joined in the call for peace.
- Muslim faithful at the Great Mosque of Paris held prayers for peace on Friday.
- Chief Rabbi of Rome Riccardo Di Segni said the Jewish community was “in harmony” with the Vatican.
- In Lebanon, the vice president of the Shiite Higher Council, Sheikh Abdel Amir Qabalan, voiced support.
- Christian leaders across the Balkans and in Latin America also joined in the prayer for peace.

A [Reuters news report](#) noted that during the aforementioned service in Damascus led by Patriarch Gregorios III Laham, the patriarch asked Syrian clergy and Christians to resist the temptation to leave the beleaguered country. “I beg, beg, beg you, our dears, to remain here. We’re staying. If you leave, we leave. So we beg you, stop coming to our priests asking for a visa. Young men, young women, remain here. If you leave, who will remain? Only our brethren the Muslims,” said Laham, continuing: “We shall remain. We shall remain. We shall remain. And as we remain, we shall build the new Syria. If we leave, who will build Syria?”

The position taken by Pope Francis and other church leaders, urging restraint against military intervention in Syria, is not unprecedented. An article posted at [Catholicism.about.com](#) notes that Pope John Paul II asked President George H.W. Bush not to invade Iraq during the first Gulf War in 1991 and urged President George W. Bush not to invade Iraq in 2003.

In an “Address to the Diplomatic Corps” at the Vatican on January 13, 2003, John Paul stated, “War is never just another means that one can choose to employ for settling differences between nations,” and that “war cannot be decided upon ... except as the very last option and in accordance with very strict conditions.”

On March 16, 2003, in his Angelus message, John Paul stressed the need “to work with responsibility for peace,” noting: “There is still time to negotiate; there is still room for peace, it is never too late to



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come to an understanding and to continue discussions.”

His appeal fell on deaf ears; however, and the U.S. invasion began two days later, on March 18, 2003.

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