

Pope Francis calls for 'courage' toward peace between Israel, Palestine

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Francis dived into the Middle East peace process on Sunday (June 8), urging the Israeli and Palestinian presidents to act with courage and end what he called the “spiral of hatred and violence” during a historic prayer meeting at the Vatican.

Before the solemn ceremony, Israeli President Shimon Peres and his Palestinian counterpart, Mahmoud Abbas, warmly embraced and joked together inside the pope’s Santa Marta residence as a smiling Francis looked on.

The Middle East leaders were joined by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual leader of the world’s Eastern Orthodox Christians, and proceeded to the Vatican gardens for a tightly orchestrated 90-minute ceremony that was notable for the absence of any religious symbols.

Earlier, in St. Peter’s Square, a handful of protesters waved Palestinian flags in a bid to send a stronger political message to what the Vatican previously described as a “pause from politics.”

“It is my hope that this meeting will mark the beginning of a new journey where we seek things that unite, so as to overcome the things that divide,” Francis said.

“Peacemaking calls for courage, much more so than warfare. It calls for the courage to say yes to encounter and no to conflict, yes to dialogue and no to violence.”

The ceremony included musical interludes from a chamber orchestra and prayers from the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths (in Hebrew, English, Italian and Arabic). It ended with the leaders’ individual invocations for peace, a handshake as a sign of peace and the planting of a symbolic tree in the Vatican gardens.

The prayers were said in the chronological order of the founding of the three religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Francis said people from many different cultures and nations dreamed of peace, and too many children had been cut down as “innocent victims of war and violence.”

“How many moments of hostility and darkness have we experienced, how much blood has been shed, how many lives have been shattered,” Francis said. “May the words ‘division,’ ‘hatred,’ and ‘war’ be banished from the heart of every man and woman.”

Peres described Francis as a “bridge builder” who had touched people’s hearts regardless of their faith or nation during his visit to the Holy Land in May. He said both Israelis and Palestinians were “aching for peace.”

“The tears of mothers over their children are still etched in our hearts,” Peres said in Hebrew. “We must put an end to their cries, to the violence, to the conflict. We all need peace. Peace between equals.”

It was the first time the two presidents had met publicly in more than a year, but the ceremony also marked the first time that Jewish, Christian, and Islamic prayers were said together in the very heart of the Catholic Church.

Abbas thanked the pope “from the bottom of my heart” for proposing the ceremony and for his visit to Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories in May. He described the pontiff’s visit as “a sincere expression of your belief in peace and a truthful attempt to achieve peace between Palestinians and Israelis.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, considered the main power broker in any negotiations, did not attend the ceremony; President Peres, now 90, is due to leave office when his term expires next month.

Netanyahu has made no specific comments about the ceremony, but in remarks on Sunday at a paramilitary police base in Jerusalem he suggested that prayer was no substitute for security.

“For thousands of years, the people of Israel have been praying for peace daily. But until peace comes, we will continue to strengthen you so that you can continue to defend the state of Israel. Ultimately, that is what will guarantee our future and will also bring peace,” he said.

Before the ceremony, the Vatican had sought to downplay expectations, saying it was unlikely to lead to any immediate breakthroughs in the Middle East's troubled peace process.

The Palestinian and Israeli delegations included religious leaders of various faiths as well as Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Muslim leader Sheik Omar Abboud, who both accompanied the pope to the Middle East.