**Praying for a peaceful 2023**

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In his annual Christmas speech and prayer to the ‘city and the world’, or in Latin, Urbi et Orbi, Pope Francis said that the world is suffering from a ‘famine of peace’. While the war in Ukraine occupied much of the Pope’s ten-minute speech, he also spoke of a grave lack of peace in other regions of the world. He singled out conflicts and humanitarian crises in the Middle East, Myanmar, Haiti, and the Sahel region of Africa. The pontiff also prayed for reconciliation in Iran, where anti-government demonstrations, especially focusing on women’s issues, have swept the country for more than three months, alas still with little sign of the required talks that can improve relations between the opposing groups and take the great country ahead again. He urged not to forget those “who go hungry while huge amounts of food go to waste and resources are being spent on weapons”. The Pope said that the war in Ukraine has further aggravated the situation, putting entire peoples at risk of famine, especially in Afghanistan and in the countries of the Horn of Africa. We know that food is always a weapon in war but he urged the leaders to make food solely an instrument of peace.

[55 dead bodies recovered, 5 rescued alive from Tanda Dam in Kohat district](https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Feb-2023/55-dead-bodies-recovered-5-rescued-alive-from-tanda-dam-in-kohat-district)

Peace talks between the Russian aggressor and Ukraine, supported by the West, seem far away. A glimpse of light is the UN’s talks about the situation in February 2023, but few foresee that there is any trust between the parties to reach results; Russia is still insisting on its right to include semi-Russian speaking regions of Ukraine in Russia, already approved by the ‘Duma’, the country’s national assembly. In addition, Russia considers that Crimea, for Russia’s security reasons, must be part of Russia otherwise NATO will be too close to its borders and its major southern military bases. Furthermore, Russia in many ways considers Ukraine a part of the Russian territory and cultural sphere, not recognising it as a separate land with its own culture.

The conflict is old, and when then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin ‘let Ukraine go’ in 1991, many Russians would have opposed it if they had been asked. It happened soon after Yeltsin came to power, a quite erratic president, and some kind of union or other cooperation agreement between the countries could have avoided the current war. However, President Putin’s expansionist thinking is supported by many Russians, but not necessarily to use war to regain empire status.

[PM Shehbaz lauds security officials for thwarting terrorist attack on Mianwali police station](https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Feb-2023/pm-shehbaz-lauds-security-officials-for-thwarting-terrorist-attack-on-mianwali-police-station)

The West may understand Russia’s thinking, but would officially not say so, and the West has for the last decades done what it can to pull Ukraine closer to the West, economically, militarily, and culturally, in the West and NATO’s expansionist thinking. This policy has fuelled the current crisis. The stalemate today is caused by the West in no way willing to let Russia win the war; Ukraine defends itself, helped by the West, but it is also used by the West to fight a war of the West, not only of itself. The situation between East and West can escalate and go out of hand, and Ukraine, the West, and Russia must find their way to the negotiating table. Sadly, such a war can rage in Europe in our time, in 2022, and going into 2023.

The Norwegian King Harald V (86) said in an interview a few days ago that to think that war could again occur in Europe was the last thing he would have foreseen. “But obviously I was wrong”, he said.

The Orthodox Church in Ukraine has broken away from the Russian Orthodox Church, which otherwise considers itself the leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This year, Ukraine decided to celebrate Christmas on 25 December, as is common in the West following the Gregorian calendar, not 7 January, which is common in Russia, based on the old Julian calendar. Although Russia, too, follows the Gregorian calendar, having abolished the Julian calendar in 1918, the church sticks to the old dates.

[Cold, dry weather expected in most parts of country](https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Feb-2023/cold-dry-weather-expected-in-most-parts-of-country)

The Russian President and Church claim that the West has become too secular and decadent, drifting away from key aspects of traditional Christian faith and social norms. This means that there are some aspects of religion in the war between Russia and Ukraine, but it is much more a war of ideology or a conflict between Western or Eastern affiliations. It should be noted that there is some disagreement within the church in Ukraine as some want to stick to traditional Russian religious thinking. This sometimes leads to questions about loyalty within Ukraine.

Religions are meant to be instruments of peace, within each religion and also between religions. Alas, history is full of the opposite, as people behave against God’s will and even against common sense. A few days ago, the new King Charles III in the UK attended a Christian service, as his mother and predecessor Queen Elisabeth II, too, always did at Christmas. In an inter-faith spirit, King Charles also attended the Jewish Hanukkah celebrations ending on 25 December, and he had earlier acknowledged the Hindu Diwali festival of lights, as the new Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is a Hindu, indeed something new to the Brits. It should be noted that King Charles is more open and inclusive of other religions than has been common before, not only giving prominence to Christianity and the Anglican Church, which he is heading. When he was still the Prince of Wales, he said that he would have preferred to be ‘Head of Faith’, not only ‘Head of The Faith’, meaning the Anglican Church. I believe that it is important that all religions have openness to other religions, yet, at the same time, the religions should keep strong their dogma and doctrines. But we should also look for what is the same, alike or similar in other religions—and in all humans believe in faith, justice, fairness, and peace.

[Elahi blames PDM of political victimisation](https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Feb-2023/elahi-blames-pdm-of-political-victimisation)

Cultural differences and religion can be behind conflicts and wars, and they can be used to justify tensions and disagreements, or they can be used to create peace and understanding, as they should be—and as Christian, Muslim and other religious leaders keep emphasising. Conflicts and wars occur when there are economic and social differences, but such differences can also have religious, ethnic, and other dimensions. We must be careful that such differences do not increase even more than what is the case. In Europe today, there is a need for proactive measures to avoid discrimination against immigrants in a wide range of fields. But also in other countries, attention must be given to creating better understanding between groups, including in Pakistan. We mustn’t just pity minorities and the poor; we must proactively let them get more room and space, and a fair and equal share of God’s gifts to humanity.

When we see conflicts in the world, if they have been latent for a long or just flared up, we should ask why we didn’t do more to avoid the conflicts from happening. With so many conflicts in our time, we could and should have taken measures before it became too late. In the future, military and other defence organisations, indeed NATO and Russia, peace organisations, religious and cultural organisations, and all people of goodwill, must do more to avoid conflicts. The rich and the powerful private and government elites of the world have special responsibilities to do better. We know enough to succeed if we want to. Let us get on with the job of finding ways that are good for all men and women. Let us begin with praying for a peaceful 2023.