

Is This True Unity? Israeli, Palestinian Presidents Launch Vatican Prayer Meeting

The Israeli and Palestinian presidents began an unprecedented meeting with **Pope Francis** on Sunday to pray together in the hope that the gesture will relaunch the Middle East peace process.

Francis, who made the surprise invitation to Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas last month during his trip to the Holy Land, welcomed the two leaders in front of the modest guest house where he has decided to reside after renouncing the spacious papal apartments in the Apostolic Palace.

It was the first public meeting between the two presidents in more than a year and was taking place more than a month after United States-led peace talks collapsed amid bitter mutual recrimination.

The three, accompanied by Patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual head of the Orthodox Christians, were then driven together in a white mini-van to what the **Vatican** has called a “neutral” site in the Vatican gardens with no religious symbols.

They walked together, with the pope between Peres and Abbas, down a tree-lined lane to their seats on either side of the pope as a chamber orchestra played.

“We have gathered here, Israelis, Palestinians, Jews, Christians and Muslims, so that each of us can express his or her desire for peace for the Holy Land and for all who dwell there,” the master of ceremonies said as the service began.

She said the presidents wanted to voice “the desire of their respective peoples to invoke to God the common longing for

peace.”

Religious representatives of the three religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—then began prayers for peace in Italian, Hebrew, Arabic and English.

The Vatican has played down any expectations that the meeting—billed as a “pause from politics”—will lead to any immediate breakthroughs in efforts to solve the region’s tortuous problems and says it is not meddling in regional issues.

“No one is presumptuous enough to think peace will break out on Monday,” said Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, a Church official in charge of Catholic sites in the Holy Land and a key organizer of the encounter.

“The intention of this initiative is to re-open a road that has been closed for some time, to re-create a desire, a possibility, to make people dream,” he said, adding that the pope does not want to be involved in details of issues such as borders or settlements.

Netanyahu Absent

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the key Israeli decision-maker, is not attending and he refuses to deal with the **Palestinian** unity government, backed by Hamas Islamists, that Abbas swore in last Monday. Peres will leave office next month.

Netanyahu has made no direct comment on the meeting, but in remarks on Sunday at a paramilitary police base in Jerusalem he suggested that prayer is 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 told the troops.

But the fact that Francis' bold move has managed to bring together the two presidents shows his desire to engage political leaders, offering inter-religious dialogue as a building block.

The event, which the pope asked believers of all religions to join in prayer, marked the first time that Jewish, Christian and Islamic prayers were held in the tiny city state that is the headquarters of the 1.2 billion-member Roman Catholic Church.

At the end of the ceremony the pope, Peres and Abbas were due to make individual addresses that the Vatican has called "invocations" for peace.

Peres's office said he will "call upon leaders of all faiths to work together to ensure that religion and the name of the Lord will not be used to justify bloodshed and terror."

In an interview with Italy's La Repubblica newspaper, Abbas said: "Nothing should stop the search for solutions so that each of our peoples can live in a sovereign state."

The three will also plant an olive tree that the program calls "an enduring symbol of the mutual desire for peace between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples."

Additional reporting by Jeffrey Heller in Jerusalem; Editing by Stephen Powell and David Goodman

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