

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates

Praying for Peace

In the season of Lent, it is natural for our minds and prayers to turn to the Holy Land, the place of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. As citizens of the United States, we have an urgent reason to focus prayer and thoughtful attention on peace in the Holy Land this year.

Last year, Secretary of State John Kerry, with the full support of President Barack Obama, launched a concerted effort to reach a framework agreement as a basis for resolving the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has created tension in the Middle East with repercussions throughout the world.

Pope Francis and the Holy See have expressed support for his initiative. In January, the Holy Father, in an address to the diplomatic corps, said: "[T]he resumption of peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians is a positive sign, and I express my hope that both parties will resolve, with the support of the international community, to take courageous decisions aimed at finding a just and lasting solution to a conflict which urgently needs to end."

The Bishops of the United States have frequently urged U.S. leadership for peace. In January 2013 Cardinal Timothy Dolan as President of the Bishops' Conference and I, as Chairman of its Committee on International justice and Peace, urged the President "to exercise vigorous leadership for Israeli-Palestinian peace" and promised to support strong U.S. leadership for peace. Subsequently in June, we commended the president "for traveling to the Holy Land" and "for charging Secretary of State John Kerry with the urgent task of bringing the parties to the negotiating table."

At the end of March or in April, Secretary Kerry expects to put forth a "framework" for peace. In a meeting with religious leaders recently, the Secretary asked for the support of Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders. In light of this, I urge the people of the Diocese of Des Moines to pray for peace and to support mutual adoption of a framework of peace by the Israelis and Palestinians.

For decades, the Holy See (the Vatican) and the bishops of the United States have supported a two-state solution to the conflict, a secure and recognized Israel living in peace with the viable and independent Palestinian state. The aspirations of two peoples and affirmed access to the Holy Sites by the three faiths that share the land we call holy have been lifted up. Now is the critical time for the Diocese of Des Moines to join practitioners of the three faiths and people of good will to ardently support Israelis and Palestinians seeking peace.

Oftentimes, the efforts to reach peace between these two entities are greeted with skepticism. This reaction can be understood in light of past failed attempts. But we Christians are a people of hope. Seemingly intractable situations, e.g. Northern and Southern Ireland, overcoming apartheid in South Africa, and the coming together in friendship of the United States with Germany and Japan have demonstrated that the presumed impossible can occur.

In the spirit of leadership by Pope Francis which he exercised in the face of the threat of U.S. bombing of Syria by calling for prayer and fasting, I urge you to undertake such practices now in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land. I am convinced peace is possible. You can play a significant role by lifting your hearts and hands in prayer and by fasting.

Finally, let your voices join the sentiments of your hearts. Speak up. Let our public officials in the federal government as well as neighbors know of our support for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons and daughters of God.