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Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, speaks during a news conference at the patriarchate headquarters in the Old City of Jerusalem May 13, 2025. Pizzaballa had just returned from the Vatican where he attended the May 7-8 conclave, which on its second day elected former Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV. (OSV News/Reuters/Ammar Awad)



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The importance of continuity and diversity as well as the issues of war and peace were a main topic of conversation for the 133 cardinals as they gathered to vote in the conclave May 7-8, said Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem.

On May 8, he and the other cardinal electors elected American-born Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV.

In comments at his first press conference since returning to Jerusalem, Pizzaballa said the discussion around the situation in Gaza and Ukraine took an important place in the conclave conversations, but he noted that there are currently more than 50 conflicts in the world that also need to be remembered.

"The cardinals are coming from all over the world. There were cardinals from South Sudan, where the situation is not very different," he said. "Everyone brought their concerns, and war and pursuit of peace was central. You can't talk about theology ... without mentioning (life.) The life of the church is not separate from the life of the world. It is very present."

While the church will not be involved in political discussions, it "can't be silent" and needs to speak out and advocate for peace, he said.

He called the situation in Gaza "inconceivable."

"We can't understand this and we can't accept this. We call on all people to resolve this conflict in a different way," he said. "Starvation is not solving the situation, it is only making it worse. This is not acceptable. It is no way to resolve a conflict, it is only creating hate."

Francis had made it a point to be in touch with the Gaza Holy Family Parish on a regular basis, and it is yet to be seen if Leo will continue with the contact in the same way, Pizzaballa said, answering a question.

In response to another question about the situation for Christians in Syria, the patriarch noted that life for Christians in the Middle East has never been easy and as they already have for "years, we are facing lots of trouble in Syria and Iraq."

"We are in continued contact. We can't solve major problems but we can express solidarity and closeness. The church supports them from a humanitarian point of view," he said.

Pizzaballa — who was created a cardinal by Francis in 2023 at the same time as the newly-elected Leo and had been considered by some as a possible candidate for the papacy as well — said he had met the new pope twice, including when they were made cardinals, and hoped there were be an opportunity to meet more often.

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He described the conclave as a "very interesting," "very positive" and "unique" experience, especially during the preparation for it when the cardinals met before the elections and he was able to hear the differing opinions of the various cardinals discussing the church's relations to the world and relations within the church.

"The church doesn't 'jump around,'" he said, adding that it was important to "continue the dialogue with the world Pope Francis started; to continue improving and deepening the dialogue within the church." He noted however that the church does not enter the fray of political discussions but enters as a religious voice.

Interreligious dialogue is also important, he said, noting the message Leo sent May 8 to Rabbi Noam E. Marans, director of interreligious affairs of the American Jewish Committee, reaffirming his commitment to Catholic-Jewish relations in the spirit of "Nostra Aetate," which is nearing its 60th anniversary.

"Nostra Aetate," issued during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), marked a turning point in the church's relationship with non-Christian religions. It firmly rejected the idea of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus and called for respectful dialogue and mutual understanding among all faith traditions.

He also noted that Israeli President Isaac Herzog is expected to represent Israel at the pope's official inauguration on May 18 along with other foreign leaders, indicating a desire to improve relations, he said. Israel sent only its ambassador to the Vatican to attend the funeral of Pope Francis.

He said he believed the pope "would be very present" in the international arena as a religious leader.

"It can't be otherwise," he said, although it is impossible to know how exactly that will present itself. "He will bring the voice of the church, not only of the people, especially in the context of poverty, migration and war."

Overall the process of the conclave, Pizzaballa said, "was slow and solemn."

The Italian cardinal mentioned several times the special opportunity to sit underneath the frescoes of Michelangelo as the procedures of the conclave got underway. His seat was just under the fresco of the "Creation of Adam," and he spent moments of waiting "just looking and enjoying" the frescoes, he said. He had seen them only once before, as a tourist so hadn't had the time to really reflect on them, he said.

While certainly a pilgrimage by the pope to the Middle East and the Holy Land is hoped for, Pizzaballa noted in his customary jovial way that it is still early on in the first days of Leo's papacy so he must first be let "to breathe."

"I don't know when it will be possible for a visit to the Middle East and the Holy Land. The context of time has to be prepared. Everything here is complicated," he said.

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