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Receiving the 59th World Day of Peace Message in the current Australian context



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Sister Adele Howard, RSM, an Honorary Fellow in the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy of Australian Catholic University, looks at Pope Leo's Message for the 59th World Day of Peace in the current Australian context.

As we in Australia reflect on the message of Pope Leo XIV for the 59th World Day of Peace (1 January 2026), we stand in the midst of a global struggle between light and darkness, goodness and evil. Until recently, we had been at a distance from the extreme violence and destruction of war and terrorism in countries such as Sudan and Ukraine, and in the Middle East.

However, on Sunday, 14 December 2025, Australia's peace was shattered when two armed gunmen, a father and son, shot and killed 15 people, wounded 40 others and traumatised the Jewish community whom they had targeted. The Australian nation was shocked and stunned by this event.

Hundreds of members of the Jewish community were gathered in an area of Bondi Beach, Sydney, Australia's most iconic beach, for the first night of Hanukkah, the eight-day Jewish "Festival of Lights", when the shots rang out.

For the Jewish community, the lighting of the Hanukkah candle symbolises the transformation of darkness into light and proclaims that light cannot be extinguished by darkness.

In his message for the 59th World Day of Peace, Pope Leo tells us that "amid the trials we face in our historical circumstances, [in] order to overcome the darkness, it is necessary to see the light and believe in it".

For Christians, the symbol of light is central to our faith: Jesus is the light of the world.

In the face of the murderous actions of the terrorists, the threat of the extinguishment of that light and peace became a reality in the Australian community. Yet, the immediate actions of the lifeguards, the paramedics, the police, brave members of the public, and 100,000 of their fellow citizens to donate blood and plasma that the wounded of Bondi might live, witnessed to the power of humanity to shine a light in the darkest and direst of circumstances.

On 21 December, exactly a week after the horrific event and the final full day of Hanukkah, a National Day of Reflection, "Light over Darkness: Night of Unity", was held at Bondi Beach, led by the Jewish community.

All Australians were invited to light a candle at 6:47 pm – the time when the massacre occurred – and observe a minute's silence as an act of remembrance for the 15 persons who lost their lives, the seriously injured, and for all impacted by what had occurred. This was a call to stand with our Jewish community, to share in their grief, and by so doing, affirm that hatred and violence will not define the Australian people. However, during this event it became clear that anger and hostility were threatening to polarise the wider response to this tragedy.

Addressing the issue of how we "defuse hostility through dialogue", Pope Leo's message stresses the peacemaker role for all religions "to guard against the growing temptation to weaponize even thoughts and words. The great spiritual traditions, as well as right reason, teach us to look beyond blood ties or ethnicity, beyond associations that accept only those who are similar and reject those who are different."



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Among the invited speakers was the State Premier, Chris Minns. In his address, Premier Minns, a Catholic, quoted from Psalm 34 and reflected on it. "The Psalm does not end with solely government responsibility.

It says, 'Seek peace and pursue it' and that is the task of every citizen. Peace doesn't happen by accident. It must be actively pursued through compassion, through kindness and moral courage. Government can encourage and support it, but people must live it."

In this, he echoes Pope Leo's words to every person to believe that peace is possible, "Dear Brothers and Sisters...Let us open ourselves to peace! Let us welcome it and recognize it, rather than believing it to be impossible and beyond our reach." Pope Leo continues, "When we treat peace as a distant ideal, we cease to be scandalized when it is denied, or even when war is waged in its name." It is for this reason that "Even when it is endangered within us and around us, like a small flame threatened by a storm, we must protect it."

Throughout the months of his pontificate, beginning with his Apostolic Blessing on the evening of his election, Pope Leo has uttered the first words of Jesus spoken to His disciples after the Resurrection, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:19,21). This ancient greeting, with its biblical roots, is shared by the other Abrahamic faiths: in Judaism, "Shalom aleichem" (Peace be upon you), in Islam, "As-salamu alaykum" (Peace be unto you).

In Christianity, Pope Leo makes clear, it is the peace of the risen Christ that is offered, "A peace that is unarmed and disarming, humble and persevering", bringing about a lasting transformation in those who receive it, coming "from God who loves us all unconditionally".

Introducing the concept of an "unarmed peace", the Holy Father reflects on the instruction Jesus gave to the Apostles ahead of His arrest and death, and His command to Peter to put away his sword rather than act to defend him. "The peace of the risen Jesus is unarmed, because His was an unarmed struggle in the midst of concrete historical, political, and social circumstances," Pope Leo writes.

"Christians must together bear prophetic witness to this novelty, mindful of the tragedies in which they have too often been complicit."

These words must resonate for governments in Australia, now debating tougher proposed gun laws in response to the Bondi tragedy, while identifying our new global responsibilities for building peace. This deeper capacity could lead to a more effective contribution to peace in our Oceania region and across our world.

In a world that equates strength with domination, Pope Leo tells us that "Goodness is disarming."

Pope Leo proposes practical steps to achieve global peace: "We need to encourage and support every spiritual, cultural, and political initiative that keeps hope alive... to cultivate prayer, spirituality, and ecumenical and interreligious dialogue as paths of peace... We must promote self-awareness in civil societies, forms of responsible association, experiences of nonviolent participation, and practices of restorative justice on both a small and large scale."

In the months ahead, as the country emerges from the tragic terrorist attack in Sydney, Australians will need to work together to find new expressions of mutual trust and peace in order to achieve lasting harmony in our society.