# The Pope's Heart for the Holy Land

Pope Francis's closeness to the Land of Jesus was undeniable, and which was made especially evident during his historic pilgrimage there in May 2014. During his visit, the pilgrim Pope experienced the reality of a land so dear, and yet so complex firsthand. On May 25, 2014, from the Manger Square in Bethlehem, the Holy Father's words rang out clearly and directly, "In this, the birthplace of the Prince of Peace, I wish to invite you, President Mahmoud Abbas, together with President Shimon Peres, to join me in heartfelt prayer to God for the gift of peace. I offer my home in the Vatican as a place for this encounter of prayer." This encounter indeed took place June 8, 2014. "All of us want peace," the Argentine Pope continued, "and many people build it day by day through small gestures and acts; many of them are suffering, yet patiently persevere in their efforts to be peacemakers. All of us – and especially those placed at the service of their respective peoples – have the duty to become instruments and artisans of peace, especially by our prayers."

"Building peace is difficult, but living without peace is a constant torment," Pope Francis prophetically concluded that day. Over the years, this torment has sadly become increasingly evident. The Pope's constant concern for the situation in the Holy Land made his closeness to the suffering peoples deeply felt throughout every moment of those last 18 months. Father Gabriel Romanelli, of the Latin parish in Gaza, has borne witness to this. For example, whenever he could, Pope Francis used to call him in the evening to receive news and even just to have a chat, while outside the church compound, devastation and death reigned.

Right up to the last heartfelt message prepared for the *Urbi et Orbi* of his final Easter, just hours before his death, Pope Francis remained deeply engaged. "The growing climate of anti-Semitism throughout the world is worrisome. Yet at the same time, I think of the people of Gaza, and its Christian community in particular, where the terrible conflict continues to cause death and destruction and to create a dramatic and deplorable humanitarian situation. I appeal to the warring parties: call a

ceasefire, release the hostages and come to the aid of a starving people that aspires to a future of peace!”

*(April 2025)*