

Aotearoa/New Zealand

Reflecting on Pope Leo XIV's World Day of Peace Message, January 2026.

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If you scratch the surface in Aotearoa New Zealand, you will find that it is not "100% pure", "clean and green" or away from the countries of the world where there is likely to be war, a safe "bolthole" – some of the perceptions that globally New Zealand is seen as.

Yes – we have a stable, democratic political system that has operated under MMP (mixed-member proportional representation) for 30 years. The political landscape is primarily centrist, leaning left or right depending on which parties form a coalition. Currently, our government is made up of parties on the right or with a conservative viewpoint. Some of the policies that this coalition has tried to introduce or has introduced have, to put bluntly, scratched the scab off New Zealand's long festering wound – the impact of colonisation; the gap between Māori and Pakeha (which can be translated as anyone who is not Māori) in education, income and health. Some of our statistics in New Zealand are not pleasant – high rates of domestic violence compared to other countries, and a high mortality rate for Māori as opposed to non-Māori. Racism in New Zealand is also on the rise on our streets, public transport and even in institutions where racism is directed at people who look or speak differently.

Pope Leo's World Day of Peace message is a timely reminder of the practice of peace. Pope Leo reminds us that peace starts with us by quoting Saint Augustine in his World Day of Peace message: 'if you wish to draw others to peace, first have it yourselves; be steadfast in peace yourselves' (para 4). Pope Leo then follows this with 'open ourselves to peace' (para 5). If we practice peace within ourselves and with everyone we live, work, and meet, we can hopefully and eventually inspire others to do the same.

Pope Leo incorporates into his message a desire that when we practice peace with ourselves and others, we bring into it a 'disarming response'. This response is a childlike innocence that sees the world in wonder, everything new and bright, and, importantly, full of love and need. We are called as peacemakers and peace practitioners to respond in kind in our relationships and practices, and, importantly, to teach others to do the same. If we all practice a disarming response, then the fruits of Hope and Peace become real.

The practice of peace requires deep, authentic listening; it requires relationship-building even during difficult times. It requires us as individuals to keep our cool and respond in the face of violence with a dignified response – not to respond in kind with the sword, like Peter did when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus. It is a response that will contain our human dignity, as well as the dignity of the listener but importantly offer a perspective that is different or alternative to the narratives we are encouraged to allow to perpetuate – in which popular arguments call as realistic and what Pope Leo describes as being ‘devoid of hope, blind to the beauty of others and forgetful of God’s grace’ (para 3).

No doubt some will criticise this as an oversimplified response -but choosing to do so makes peace real and lived, not a ‘distant ideal’ or as Pope Leo warns: ‘when peace is not a reality that is lived, cultivated and protected, then aggression spreads into domestic and public life’ (para 8). It is a difficult practice, but to sustain us in this, it is necessary, as stated in the World Day of Peace message, to make time for prayer and spirituality, and to create opportunities for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue (para 14).