

Pope Leo's call for Unarmed and Disarming Peace & a Challenge to Sri Lanka

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The theme of Pope Leo's message for this year's World Day of Peace (1st January) was "Towards an unarmed and disarming peace"¹. This article is based on a talk by the author during an international webinar commemorating the World Day of Peace 2026 on 11th January 2026 organized by Pax Christi Asia Pacific, the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS) Pax Romana, the International Catholic Movement of Intellectual and Cultural Affairs (ICMICA) Pax Romana, and the International Youth Training Center (IYTC).

Pope's message for Unarmed Peace and Militarization in Sri Lanka

The armed conflict ended in 2009, but Sri Lanka is still heavily armed and militarized.

The Military is running farms, hotels, restaurants, denying ordinary people income generating opportunities. A "Defense University", headed by military personnel, runs courses on law, medicine, engineering, management, social sciences and humanity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a leadership position was given to the then Army Commander rather than medical personnel. Military personnel are offered high positions in civilian positions.

Key institutions related to disaster are under the Ministry of Defense. The Auditor General's report on the Disaster Management Centre for 2024 noted that officers with the qualifications and experience specified in the approved recruitment procedure for three senior positions, including the Director General, had not been recruited and military officers had been attached to these posts instead.

Military officers have been suspected of many serious crimes and human rights violations, but are rarely held accountable. Efforts to hold them accountable, domestically or through international initiatives, are strongly resisted on the rhetoric of "witch-hunt against war heroes". Military personnel who are accused of serious rights violations and crimes sometimes get promotions, such as the recent promotion of an Army officer who is accused in an ongoing trial in relation to enforced disappearance of journalist Prageeth Ekneligoda. His wife who wrote to the President opposing this and a few days later got a threatening phone call from a person calling himself a retired Army officer.

The military is actively involved in constructing, renovating, and maintaining Buddhist temples, particularly in the Tamil-majority North-East provinces, which is resented by local communities who are mostly Hindu and Christian. The military has also been accused of holding services in illegally constructed Buddhist sites and assisting in constructions at Buddhist sites in violation of court orders. Military continues to occupy vast swathes of Tamil villages and private lands in war ravaged Northern province. These are resented by the local Tamil communities and hampers prospects of reconciliation. Many from the majority ethnic community Sinhalese, including

Catholics, consider military as “war heroes” while many from minority Tamil community, including Catholics, consider the military as “war criminals” and an occupying force.

Pope Leo’s call for “unarmed” peace must lead to de-militarizing Sri Lanka.

Non-violent Direct Actions and Dialogue

Pope Leo’s reference to Jesus having engaged in an “unarmed struggle in the midst of concrete historical, political and social circumstances” and that “Christians must together bear prophetic witness to this novelty” must inspire nonviolent direct actions. Elsewhere, the Pope states dialogue is the most effective approach at every level but doesn’t recognize that power relations can affect dialogue. Powerful states, businesses, armed groups with political, military and financial power disadvantages oppressed communities when engaged in dialogue. An alternative to this can be nonviolent direct action. In Sri Lanka, communities such as in Iranaitheevu (Kilinochchi district) challenged the Navy through nonviolent direct action and succeeded in re-claiming their lands when dialogue had failed. Non-violent direct actions by Malaiyaha community in Anandapuram (Kurunegela district) enabled dialogue with parity of status with owners of an estate they had worked for generations, which led to land and housing rights.

Restorative Justice and Human Rights

Pope Leo’s reference to “Restorative Justice” must lead to initiatives to restore just relationships, restore equal ownership, control and use of natural resources, restore what was taken away to an extent possible (e.g. land) and to restore systems that were damaged or destroyed (e.g. judiciary). Sri Lanka and many societies, especially in Asia Pacific, are trying deal with pasts of violent armed conflicts and dictatorships and transiting to peaceful, democratic societies. These involve attempting to ensure truth is acknowledged, as well as reparations for affected communities, criminal accountability for those responsible and initiatives towards non-recurrence. There is no reference to dealing with the past in Pope Leo’s message this year. The question of “what does it mean to be at peace” is important. People can’t be at peace when hungry, homeless, jobless, stateless, discriminated against, etc. Thus, Peace is very much linked to Justice & Human Rights, which is not highlighted adequately in Pope Leo’s message this year. References to Pope Paul VI’s messages for World Peace Day, such as that promotion of human rights is the way to peace (1969)ⁱⁱ and if you want peace, work for justice (1972)ⁱⁱⁱ would complement Pope Leo’s message this year and make it more relevant.

Disarmament

As far back as 1990s, Sri Lankan government used a slogan “war for peace” which led to much suffering. Political leaders across the world use similar slogans, including armed invasions to allegedly restore democracy. Countries also justify the strengthening of armed capacity, including nuclear weapons, on the basis of protecting themselves or being equal. In such a context, Pope Leo’s strong rejection of peace through arms and call for disarmament is important. His statement

“the realization that true and lasting peace among nations cannot consist in the possession of an equal supply of armaments” must lead to Catholic communities to promote disarmament.

Political dimension to complement spiritual and cultural actions

Pope Leo promotes a holistic approach to peace by saying “We need to encourage and support every spiritual, cultural and political initiative that keeps hope alive”. He also emphasizes that we should not be distracted from the “importance of the political dimension”, which is very important in a context that some Catholics, including leaders, shy away from political engagement. Pope’s message this year must inspire Catholic to “politicize spirituality and spiritualize politics”.

Non discrimination

Pope Leo says “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.” This poses challenges to Catholic communities, who often look down on those different, such as based on class and caste. In Sri Lanka, some Catholics look down on Evangelical Christians and the LGBTIQ community and the Pope’s message is a challenge to this.

Actions on small and large scale

The Pope’s call for actions on “small and large scale” is very practical. The grassroots nature of church, with a presence in remote areas, enables community actions at the local level, including local political engagement. The national, international presence of church, enables actions at that level, including lobbying with governments and engagement with bodies like the United Nations. At all these levels, working with people of other faiths or no faith is crucial.

A significant challenge is the dissemination of Pope’s message amongst Catholic communities. There was no reference to the Pope’s message at the Mass I attended on 1st January or on Sundays afterwards. This is a pity, because it has much relevance and meaning to Sri Lanka. The Pope’s message must be translated to local languages and shared in churches, published in Catholic newspapers, magazines etc. – digitally and as hardcopies. It could be read out during Sunday Mass and used in homilies. If not, this liberating message will be limited to Rome and not reach Sri Lanka and far corners of the globe where it has much relevance.

ⁱ <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/peace/documents/20251208-messaggio-pace.html>

ⁱⁱ https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19681208_ii-world-day-for-peace.html

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19711208_v-world-day-for-peace.html