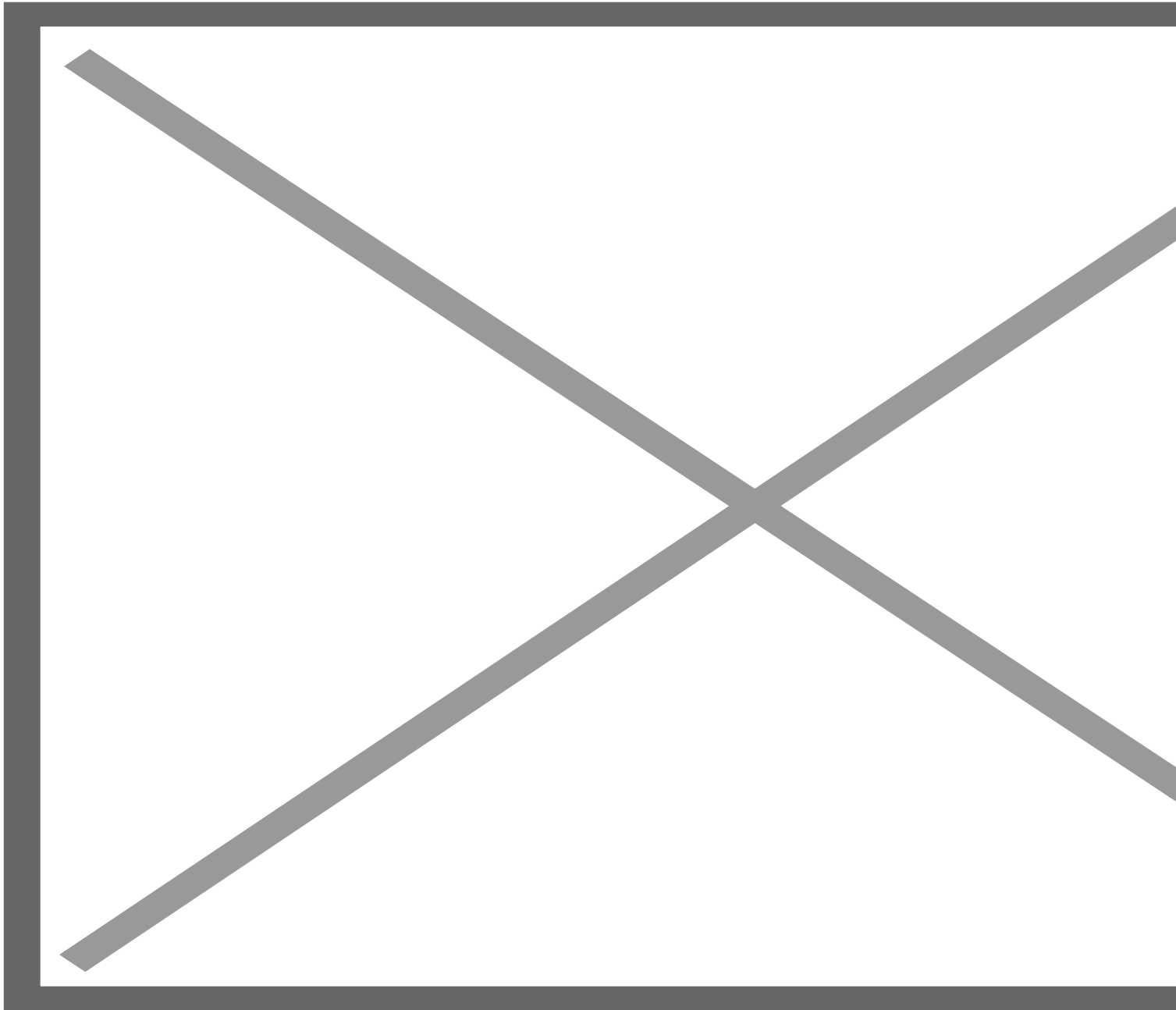


Israel apologizes after barring cardinal from Holy Sepulchre on Palm Sunday

by [Claire Giangravé](#)

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Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, speaks to journalists during a press conference at the patriarchate headquarters in Jerusalem's Old City, December 22, 2025. (AP Photo/Mahmoud Illean/File)

Following outcry from political and religious leaders for barring Catholic leaders in the Holy Land from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on Palm Sunday, Israeli authorities apologized and gave them permission to worship at the church, one of Christianity's holiest sites.

“In agreement with the Israel Police, access for representatives of the churches has been secured in order to conduct the liturgies and ceremonies and to preserve the ancient Easter traditions at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher,” read a March 30 joint statement by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Custodian of the Holy Land, who heads a body of Franciscan priests and brothers who tend to the region’s holy sites.

The statement emphasized that “especially in times of hardship and conflict, such as those presently endured, safeguarding freedom of worship remains a fundamental and shared duty,” adding that all religions be allowed to practice and worship. The leaders also called for an end to the “tragic war.”

The Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, and Archbishop Paul Ghallagher, who oversees the Holy See’s relations with other states, met with the Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, Yaron Sideman, to discuss the “unfortunate” incident on Monday.

“During the conversation, the parties expressed regret over the incident, offered clarifications and acknowledged an agreement between the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and local authorities allowing participation in Holy Week liturgies at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem,” read a Vatican statement on the meeting.

Following the strikes by Israeli and United States forces against Iran on February 28, several holy sites in the Old City of Jerusalem, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, were closed. The Israeli government enforced a rule prohibiting gatherings of more than 50 people in places without bomb shelters.

The Latin patriarch, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, and Francesco Ielpo, the custodian, and two other priests were stopped by Israeli police on Sunday as they prepared to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to conduct a mass that was to be streamed online, in lieu of the traditional service attended by hundreds.

Pizzaballa later said on TV2000, the Italian bishops’ conference television channel, that the Patriarchate had complied with Israel’s security restrictions by organizing a “small private ceremony” to commemorate the Christian feast. The custodian of the Holy Land had said in a previous statement that it was communicating with local authorities to receive guidelines on how to celebrate Holy Week.

“There were no clashes; everything was done in a very polite manner. I do not want to force the issue,” the cardinal said, adding that he hoped there would be clarifications by the government on how to ensure safety and religious freedom in Jerusalem.

The Israel police wrote in a post on X on Monday that, after a “productive meeting” with Pizzaballa, “a mutual framework has been established for upcoming Easter ceremonies.”

Backlash to Israel’s action on Palm Sunday included comments from US Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee, who called the events “unfortunate.”

The Canadian prime minister, representatives from the European Union, and French, Italian, and Spanish leaders also posted a statement on social media condemning the event. “We must not allow war to exclude followers of any religion from our shared holy city, Jerusalem,” wrote Hungarian President Viktor Orbán in a post on X.

The president of Israel, Isaac Herzog, wrote on X on Sunday that he had called Pizzaballa “to express my great sorrow” over his being denied entry to the church. He said his country continues its “unwavering commitment to freedom of religion for all faiths and to upholding the status quo at the holy sites of Jerusalem.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated that the decision was made out of special concern for Pizzaballa’s safety, but said upon hearing about it that he “instructed the authorities to enable the Patriarch to

hold services as he wishes.”

In an interview with the Italian daily *La Repubblica*, Olivier Poquillon, a Dominican priest who is director of the French Biblical and Archaeological School of Jerusalem, said denying the patriarch access to Holy Sepulchre represented “a complete rupture.”

Poquillon questioned whether security concerns were actually the reason behind the ban, since the Patriarchate’s headquarters is only a few blocks from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

“One might ask whether this restriction on the exercise of religious freedom was also intended as a way to pressure the Catholic Church, particularly at a time when certain Catholic groups in the United States are questioning the legitimacy of the conflict,” he said.

He also noted that the first critical reactions to the news came from Israeli citizens.

At the Vatican, Pope Leo XIV celebrated Palm Sunday before cheering crowds in St. Peter’s Square. During his homily, the pope referred to Jesus as the “King of Peace” seven times, offering biblical examples of when Christ offered messages of humility and nonviolence.

“Brothers and sisters, this is our God: Jesus, King of Peace, who rejects war, whom no one can use to justify war,” Leo said, adding, “He does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war.”

The pope’s words came as world leaders, including the United States and Israel, employ religious language to frame the ongoing conflicts. US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth used the term Armageddon to present military action as sanction by God.

“The abuse and manipulation of God’s name to justify this and any other wars is the gravest sin we can commit at this time,” Pizzaballa said on a video call organized by the Oasis Foundation, a Catholic organization for Muslim-Christian dialogue on March 15.

Leo on Sunday asked for prayers for Christians living in the Middle East, “who are suffering the consequences of a brutal conflict and, in many cases, are unable to observe fully the liturgies of these holy days.” —Religion News Service