

## Pope's prayer meeting with Peres and Abu Mazen will take place on 8 June



(©Ansa) Pope Francis with Shimon Peres

*The Vatican spokesman, Fr. Federico Lombardi, has confirmed that both sides have decided on Pentecost Sunday as the meeting date. The meeting will take place in the afternoon in the Vatican*

**ANDREA TORNIELLI, VATICAN INSIDER, 29 MAY 2014**

"We will soon decide on a date and then we'll discuss the content," the Custodian of the Holy Land, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, had told SIR, the Italian Episcopate's religious information service. Francis asked Pizzaballa to organise the prayer meeting in the Vatican, which he announced at the end of the mass he celebrated in Bethlehem last Sunday. The official date has now been set and was announced by the Vatican spokesman, Fr. Federico Lombardi: it will take place on Sunday 8 June (the feast of Pentecost) in the Vatican.

As is known, the prayer meeting between the Pope, the Palestinian president Abu Mazen and Israeli president Shimon Peres must take place before the latter's mandate comes to an end. The purpose of this meeting is not to attempt mediation or discuss new road maps: Francis wants to keep the encounter strictly religious.

"The purpose of the meeting will be to pray not to mediate," Francis said on the return flight from the Holy Land to Rome. "The two presidents and I will only meet to pray and I believe that prayer is important and doing this helps. Then they will go home. There will be a rabbi, a Muslim and me. I have asked the Custody of the Holy land to deal with the practical side of things," Francis went on to say. As the Pope confirmed in another part of the interview, the meeting was supposed to take place in the Holy Land but did not because of "logistical" problems.

When he made the surprise announcement about the invitation extended to the two presidents last Sunday in Bethlehem, Francis said: "In this place where the Prince of Peace was born, I desire to invite you, President Mahmoud Abbas, and President Shimon Peres, to raise together with me an intense prayer to God for the gift of peace. And I offer my house in the Vatican to host you in this encounter of prayer." "Everyone wants peace, many people build it every day with small gestures, many suffer patiently and bear the fatigue of many

attempts to build it. And everyone - especially those who are at the service of their people - have a duty to be the instruments and builders of peace, above all in prayer." "Building peace is hard, but living without peace is a torment. All men and women of this earth and of the whole world are asking us to bring before God their ardent desire for peace."

Yesterday, when Francis went through the various moments of his pilgrimage in the Holy Land, Francis mentioned the prayer meeting and referred to Abu Mazen and Peres as "men of peace and builders of peace." Addressing the many faithful present at the General Audience, the Pope said: "I ask you, do not leave us alone: pray, pray so that the Lord may give us peace, give us peace in that blessed land!"

In an article published on the *Time* website yesterday, Christopher J. Hale wrote: "Francis' successful overture was especially remarkable considering the failed efforts by the United States earlier this spring to get both sides to the table to begin negotiated peace talks. However, this could be the boost that Secretary of State John Kerry needed to revive this peace process, which has been largely dormant for the past four years."

"But almost immediately," Hale pointed out, "commentators have tried to downplay the meeting. Daniel Levy told *The New York Times* that the meeting would "mean nothing in big-picture terms." David Horowitz, the editor of the *Times of Israel*, added that "[i]t would be naïve to think the sight of Peres, Abbas and the pope doing anything together is going to change the world." He did acknowledge, however, that the meeting would help the "effort to foster a different mind-set among Israelis and Palestinians."

"But," the *Time* commentator concluded, "to reduce June's meeting to an act of mere symbolism fails to understand the role religion can and should play in addressing difficult political and ethnic issues. Throughout world history, religious prophets have creatively navigated tense situations to advance peace and justice. Within the past century, Gandhi, Martin Luther King and St. John Paul II showed us that religious witness can win a war without raising a hand."