



An open letter to His Holiness, Pope Francis, and to the Faithful of the Catholic Church

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November 12th, 2023

“As face answers to face in water, so does one man’s heart to another.” (Prov. 27:19).

We write as Jewish scholars, religious leaders, and long-time practitioners in Jewish-Christian dialogue, in Israel, America, and Europe, to remind our brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church of “the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham’s stock” (Nostra Aetate #4) in a time of distress and anguish for Jews all over the world.

On October 7, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and not a few Gazan civilians committed a massacre in the Southern part of Israel. Approximately 1200 civilians were slain, including women, children and babies, disabled people, and Holocaust survivors. The terrorists abused bodies, burned entire families, brutally raped woman, and committed other atrocities which the hand hesitates to write. About 240 men, women, and children were abducted and are still held hostage by Hamas. This massacre was the most horrific attack on Jews since the Holocaust. It was a full-fledged pogrom of the kind we all hoped was no longer possible.

Hamas’s genocidal crime, perpetrated on ground that is established Israeli territory since 1948, was celebrated by many people from all over the world, and justified as a legitimate act of resistance for Palestinian liberation. When Israel responded by entering Gaza to retrieve its hostages and defend itself against the existential threat of Hamas, as well as Hezbollah, Iran, the Houthis of Yemen, and their allies and supporters around the world, blame for the massacre and for the war became increasingly directed towards all Jews collectively. Many have gone far beyond the limits of political criticism against Israeli policy by voicing protest against Israel’s right to exist, and aligning with Hamas’ intentions to destroy Israel. The global surge in onslaughts against Jews since October 7th – including killings, physical assaults, threats, harassment and vandalism– marks the worst wave of antisemitism since 1945.

This state of affairs shakes the ground beneath our feet. The heavy grief for the lives that were taken is joined by a sense of deep loneliness, and a loss of confidence in the possibility of a life of safety and freedom in the sovereign state of Israel and elsewhere. Most of all, the events invoke great anxiety among us for our future. October 7th will be forever marked in Jewish memory. The implications of this terrible day will impact our sense of who we are, how we understand ourselves, and our relationships with others in ways we haven’t even begun to fathom.

We acknowledge with appreciation that His Holiness, as well as some cardinals and bishops, have expressed themselves on this issue several times by reiterating their renunciation of antisemitism and affirming Israel’s right to defend itself. We also share the Church’s grief for Palestinian civilians who fell under Hamas’s rule against their will, and were killed as a result of the war without committing any crime. As His Holiness emphasized on October 8th, “every war is a defeat” (Angelus Prayer), and the war’s most tragic cost is the loss of innocent lives. We also understand that the Church seeks to maintain political neutrality on the War in the Middle East, in which so many powers are involved, due to diplomatic considerations.

Nevertheless, we, Jews of diverse political positions, national belongings and religious backgrounds, are not reaching out to you now as diplomats or politicians. The crisis we are facing transcends politics. Eighty years after the Holocaust, the threats facing Jews are once again truly and plainly existential. We therefore ask the Church to be “mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love” (Nostra Aetate #4). This commitment, first made in 1965 and affirmed by the Church time and time again, must not be marginalized in a time of crisis, but the contrary.

Putting our trust in the “strong bond of friendship between Jews and Catholics” (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable”, 2015) which we have been cultivating for decades, we ask the Church to act as a beacon of moral and conceptual clarity amid an ocean of disinformation, distortion and deceit; to distinguish between legitimate political criticism on Israel’s policy in the past and in the present and between hateful negation of Israel and of Jews; to reaffirm Israel’s right to exist; to unequivocally condemn Hamas’ terrorist massacre aimed at killing as many civilians as possible, and to distinguish this massacre from the civilian casualties of Israel’s war of selfdefense, as tragic and heartbreaking as they are.

Recalling the Church’s “ardent desire for justice” and strong commitment “to ensur[ing] that evil does not prevail over good as it did for millions of the children of the Jewish people” (Pope John Paul II Address on the occasion of a commemoration of the Shoah, 7 April 1994, 3), we ask for the Church’s intervention in ensuring that “the spoiled seeds of anti-Judaism and anti- Semitism [will] never again be allowed to take root in any human heart” (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah”, 1998). Since remembering “is a condition for a better future of peace and fraternity” (Pope Francis, “General Audience Remarks on Holocaust Remembrance Day”, 2021), we call the Catholic faithful to join us in the memory of the victims of October 7th massacre, to advocate for the release of the kidnapped and hostages, and to acknowledge the vulnerability of the Jewish community at this moment.

Above all, we call our Catholic siblings to extend a hand in solidarity to the Jewish community throughout the world, in the spirit of the Church’s “genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant” (Pope John Paul II, Prayer at the Western Wall, 2000), that covenant of which the Catholic Church had taught that it “has never been revoked by God” (cf. 1 Romans 11:29).

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