



Impact of October 7 Attack and 2024 War in Gaza on Catholic–Jewish Relations

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1. An Inflection Point

Since *Nostra Aetate* (Paul VI 1965b), the Catholic Church has established itself slowly but surely at the forefront of interreligious diplomacy and has become a strong leader and reliable partner in institutional Jewish–Christian relations (Ben Johanan 2022; Connelly 2012; Cunningham et al. 2007; Rosen 2004; Rosenthal 2014). Although multiple scholars have expressed certitude about the persistence of anti-Jewish tropes in the Church’s pastoral practices and teachings (Adams and Hess 2018; Kertzer 2003; Teter 2020), a coherent line of action to prevent antisemitism and anti-Judaism as well as strengthen ties with Jewish communities can be traced in the actions of the institutional Church. Such actions encompass both issuing documents (Cassidy et al. 1998; Koch et al. 2015; Willebrands and de Contenson 1974; Willebrands et al. 1985) and establishing various channels of interreligious dialogue through the CRRJ (Commission for Religious Relations with Jews), including with the Chief Rabbinate of Israel as well as with the IJCIC (International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations) and Jewish leaders through the platform of the ILC (International Catholic–Jewish Liaison Committee). These seemingly strong and grounded relations are currently being tested by the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 and the war in Gaza.

Problems in the relationship between the Catholic Church and both the Jewish people and the State of Israel resurfaced under the multidirectional pressure caused by the current escalation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Three layers of tension are embedded in the Church’s relations with the Jewish people and the State of Israel: First, the differences in the Catholic historical framing of the Hamas attack and the war in Gaza in comparison to the Jewish understanding. Second, internal theological tension between Catholic teachings on Jews and Judaism versus universal fraternity (how special are relations with the Jewish people versus with all humans?). Third, the tension between loyalty towards Christians in the Holy Land and their political aspirations and maintaining positive relations with the State of Israel while avoiding taking a theological stance on Zionism. These tensions, often intertwined, translate into intra-Catholic and ecumenical challenges in the theology of Jews, Judaism, and the Land of Israel, especially in discussions on antisemitism, anti-Judaism, universal fraternity, and violence in general.

Key Catholic leaders for this analysis include Pope Francis, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, and voices in the Church in the Holy Land as well as several bishops from outside the region. Key Jewish voices are spiritual and intellectual leaders involved in interreligious dialogue, including Karma Ben Johanan, Rabbis Yitz Greenberg and Jehoshua Arhens, and others. This scope is far from global but touches on the most important points.

2. Setting the Scene

The Holy See established diplomatic relations with the State of Israel only in 1993, and its reactions to the Israeli wars historically were careful. It is worth noting that the silence of the Holy See regarding the Independence War, the Six-Day War (1967), and the Yom Kippur War (1973) hurt the Israeli and Jewish public and had a negative impact on Jewish–Catholic relations (Kenny 1993). The original cautious stance, motivated in part by concerns over the status of holy sites and

in part by the broader geopolitical implications, started to evolve particularly after the Six-Day War, which resulted in Israel's control over East Jerusalem, including significant Christian holy sites such as the Holy Sepulcher and Via Dolorosa. Despite previous Catholic concerns, access to holy sites was possible, and the war led to a more pragmatic approach from the Vatican, balancing its support for Christian interests in the Holy Land with an evolving understanding of Jewish–Christian relations, including relations with the Jewish State.^[1]

The status of Christians in the Holy Land remains one of the main issues in the relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel to date. Despite various tensions, there has been an ongoing dialogue and cooperation between Israeli and Catholic leaders in recent decades to ensure the freedom of worship for local Christians and keeping the holy sites under Christian control. Over the last six years, a parliamentary crisis and the inability to form a government seriously destabilized Israel, resulting in multiple parliamentary elections and ultimately the formation of the current government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which contributed to the deterioration of the situation of Christians in Israel. This administration, the most religious and far-right in Israel's history, has created an atmosphere enabling various religious–nationalist groups to exert force against the country's minorities (which are largely un- or underrepresented in the government). There has been a rise in violence against Christians, especially in Jerusalem, although the impunity of Jewish attackers targeting mostly Muslim Palestinians in the Occupied Territories has also heightened intergroup tensions, leading to inevitable escalations of conflict in various locations. Encouraged by the new government's political orientation, incidents were often perpetrated by young religious Jewish men, including spitting on Christian clergy and the desecration of holy sites, such as the vandalization of the Protestant cemetery on Mount Zion by Jewish Orthodox youth (Freidson 2023) or the attack on the second station of the Via Dolorosa, which was carried out by an American religious Jew (Paveley 2023; Staff 2023). These acts of violence were directed against those visibly Christian and Christian cultural heritage.

The authorities in the State of Israel failed to adequately address these issues and sometimes even acted with hostility, such as in the case of the conference “Why do (some) Jews spit on Goyim”, organized by Yisca Harani and the Center for the Study of Relations Between Jews, Christians, and Muslims at the Open University of Israel (Hasson 2023). Due to pressure from one of the seven vice-mayors of Jerusalem, Arie King (Tresca 2023), and criticism from Israel's Chief Rabbi, Shlomo Amram, the original venue (the King David Tower Museum) had to be changed at the last minute. Additionally, the Israeli Foreign Ministry decided to boycott the conference (Kirshner 2023; Lazarus 2023).

In the webinar “The Increasing Hostility Towards Christians in the Holy Land: Voices from the Field” organized by the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue, an independent body that promotes an inclusive society through education, Wadie Abu Nassar, the co-founder of the Forum of Holy Land Christians, highlighted that the Israeli government lacks a specific unit to address the concerns of the Christian minority, making it challenging for Christian victims to report abuses (Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue 2023). The bias of the Israeli police was also cited as a challenge in protecting Christians from harm. The intra-Palestinian challenges in contacts between Muslims and Christians were not addressed.

These developments were addressed by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who stated that under the current government the attackers “feel they are protected... that the cultural and political atmosphere now can justify, or tolerate, actions against Christians” (Surkes 2023). He continued, predicting that “this escalation will bring more and more violence” and that “it will create a situation that will be very difficult to correct”.

3. Christian Reactions to the Hamas Attack and the War in Gaza

Neither Pizzaballa nor the Israeli intelligence community seemed to be able to predict or counteract the extent to which the violence would grow. The surprise attack by Hamas was unprecedented in its success in harming not only the Israeli population but also its morale and the belief in the anti-terror preparedness that many held (Horovitz 2023). While the State of Israel was mustering forces to react to the assault, most mainstream Churches were issuing statements condemning the Hamas attack and expressing solidarity with the victims.

3.1. Leaders of the Mainstream Churches

Pope Francis conveyed his sorrow over the events in Israel, prayed for the victims' families, and called for peace during his Angelus prayer on Sunday, 8 October (Francis 2023a). Similarly, Orthodox leaders mourned the victims and wished for peace. Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch, expressed his grief in a rather theological manner, carefully avoiding any direct mention of Hamas, Israel, or Palestine. Instead, he referred to "the news coming from the suffering Middle East" and emphasized the struggle for peace as "not only a divine commandment but also a universal value and an essential precondition for the respect and protection of human dignity" (Bartholomew 2023). Other Orthodox leaders issued similar statements that explicitly mentioned Hamas and prayed for God's mercy over the victims without commenting on the wider political context (Greek Orthodox Metropolis of San Francisco 2023).

Lutheran leaders were among the first to link the Hamas attack to concerns about Israeli military actions. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) immediately expressed deep worry regarding Hamas' attacks on Israeli towns and civilians as well as the subsequent actions of the Israeli army, which caused casualties and chaos in an already volatile region (The Lutheran World Federation 2023b). In a follow-up statement on 11 October, the LWF called for the release of the hostages and the protection of civilians (The Lutheran World Federation 2023a). A few days later, Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, issued a pointed statement condemning Hamas' actions and Israel's retaliation against the Palestinian people, both Christian and Muslim (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 2023). In it, she identified the Israeli occupation, the expansion of settlements, and the growing Israeli violence as the root cause of the violence that erupted on 7 October.

3.2. Between Christian Zionism and Postcolonial Paradigm

Meanwhile, polarization grew among many Protestant Churches and parachurch organizations. Among Christians, apart from moderate voices, a clear bifurcation can be noted in Christian Zionist and postcolonial perspectives, both having different historical and theological focuses.

Christian Zionism has evolved from its early theological roots in the seventeenth century through significant developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Lewis 2010). It has some common points with various forms of Jewish Zionism such as the return to Zion (central to Jewish liturgy since Babylonian exile), the right to self-determination, the right to have a national home that would be a safe haven for Jewish people in view of antisemitic persecutions, etc. According to some scholars, the British government's issuance of the Balfour Declaration, which expressed support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, was influenced by Christian Zionist sentiments among some British political leaders (Lewis 2010; Alexander 2018). The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was seen by many Christian Zionists, especially in retrospect, as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. This event significantly boosted the Christian Zionist movement, especially among American evangelicals (Hummel 2019). The key assumption of contemporary Christian Zionism, similarly to some forms of religious Jewish Zionism, is that the modern State of Israel is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and (in contrast to the Jewish Zionists) a key component in the eschatological sequence of the Parousia. Particularly important is the notion that without the State of Israel, Jesus' Second Coming cannot take place;

therefore, Christians must support Israel at all costs. Moreover, the wars and conflicts are heralds of the approaching End of Times (Clark 2007; McDermott 2016). Several theologians have criticized this perspective because of the conflation of biblical prophecy with politics, exacerbating the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and disregarding the perspective of Palestinian Christians (Burge 2013; Raheb 2014; Wagner 1994). At the same time, it is worth noting that the establishment of the State of Israel is seen as a fulfillment of biblical prophecies by many Zionist Jews and is an important component of the Israeli national identity. Currently, the movement is very visible, and Christian Zionist organizations, drawing on Hal Lindsey’s eschatological views, see the Gaza war as a part of “God’s greater plan for his son, the messiah, to vanquish evil and bring about a millennium of Christian peace” (Sturm 2024), which raises questions about the absence of concern for Jews for their own sake and treating them instrumentally as mere elements of the eschatological puzzle. Christians United for Israel (CUFI),^[2] International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ),^[3] Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry (FOI)^[4], and others have maintained strong support for Israel since the beginning of the current escalation. It might be suggested that to some extent they are viewing the conflict through an eschatological lens.

The postcolonial perspective on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict often conceptualizes it in terms of white settler colonialism, highlighting colonial legacies of the British Mandate, seeing the Balfour Declaration and the establishment of the Jewish State as ignoring the aspirations of the indigenous Arab population^[5] and the asymmetry of power relations between Israelis and Palestinians (state apparatus, military force, international support, etc.). It focuses on the experience of Nakba and sees the ongoing expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank as a continuation of this colonial project, further dispossessing Palestinians of their land and resources.^[6] It encourages cultural resistance and sometimes also armed struggle and encourages solidarity with Palestinians as oppressed by imperialism and Western colonialism (Khalidi 2006; Pappé 2006; Said 1978; Shlaim 1998). The postcolonial approach is reflected in Palestinian liberation theology (mostly Protestant) offering a framework for understanding and addressing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict through the lens of Christian faith and social justice (Ateek 2014; Raheb 2012), demanding the end of the occupation (World Council of Churches 2009).^[7] A reflection of this approach can be found, for example, in the letter initiated by the organization “Progressive International” and its Palestinian members but signed by North American Christians (End the Nakba 2023). This approach can be criticized for sometimes overlooking antisemitism or even adapting antisemitic tropes and at times confusing the Jewish people in general with the State of Israel (Ogilvie 2023), assigning the blame to all the Jews.

3.3. Catholic Reactions in the U.S.

The Catholic Church in its relationship with the State of Israel attempted to pave the middle way between these two perspectives. Such an approach stems to a large extent from the organizational structure of the Vatican curia, dividing the relations into diplomatic (Secretariat of State) and theological (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews). This has resulted in avoiding assigning any theological significance to the establishment and continuous existence of the State of Israel and advocating for political solutions (peace and justice for Palestinians, two-state solution). This issue plays a role not only in the diplomacy of the Holy See towards the State of Israel but also within its relationship with the Jewish people and the Jewish–Catholic dialogue. In the past three decades, this approach has functioned well enough not to jeopardize the fragile balance in these relations; however, structurally, it makes it more difficult to develop a theology of the State of Israel or even the Jewish relation to the Land of Israel. The Church chose to maintain this middle way in the wake of the Hamas attack.

As the U.S. is home to the largest Jewish community in the diaspora and is Israel’s strongest ally, the voices of Catholic hierarchs in the U.S. are of particular significance for Jewish–Catholic relations on the ground. Catholic–Jewish relations in the U.S. have developed considerably in the past six decades, and Catholic bishops in the U.S often have close ties with Jewish communities

because of deliberate efforts to heal historical wounds of antisemitism, recognize shared values and scriptures, and collaborate on common goals, reflecting a commitment to fostering mutual respect and cooperation in a pluralistic society. This commitment makes these bishops particularly sensitive to all the issues that might be troubling their Jewish counterparts, including the State of Israel, and their voices particularly relevant for Catholic–Jewish relations. In the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attack, on 8 October, Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Religious Liberty, expressed his solidarity not only with Israel but also with the Jewish community of New York:

From here in Rome, my heart goes out to the assaulted people of Israel, and to our Jewish community we cherish as friends and neighbors back home in New York, realizing with tears that their sabbath yesterday was anything but peaceful. A secure and safe home, surely intended by God for all His Children, wherever they may be. To have that home attacked is a sacrilege; to defend that home is righteous. (Dolan 2023a)

Cardinal Sean O'Malley, Archbishop of Boston, also issued a strong condemnation of the attack on 11 October: "Both the purpose of the attack and its barbaric methods are devoid of moral or legal justification. There is no room for moral ambiguity on this issue" (O'Malley 2023). Bishop Joseph C. Bambera of Scranton stated the following:

On behalf of the Catholic community of northeastern and north central Pennsylvania and well beyond, please know that we stand with the nation of Israel and the Jewish communities both locally and throughout the world. ... We pray with, and for you, this night for God's peace. I think it is fair to say that our hearts, like yours, are broken. (Diocese of Scranton 2023)

These first reactions focus on denouncing the attack and expressing solidarity with the victims, as well as calling for peace. These messages grew more and more nuanced as the war unfolded. On [\[27\]](#) October, David J. Malloy, the Bishop of Rockford and Chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on International Peace and Justice, not only condemned the Hamas terrorism and called for the release of the hostages but also urged Congress to provide support for relief efforts in Gaza, including humanitarian corridors. He also pointed to the need to provide a lasting solution "respecting the rights, needs, and aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians" (Malloy 2023).

The Most Rev. Mark E. Brennan, Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston, in his statement issued ten days after the attack, added to the condemnation of Hamas a reflection of the Catholic theory of just war, explaining very clearly how Israel has the right to defend itself and that Hamas' hatred of Jews is the main obstacle for peace. However, he also pointed to the moral risks of prolonged Israeli military operations in Gaza and urged Israel to "focus on swift action towards its stated goals" (Brennan 2023). Three months later, the same bishop wrote the following:

Israel's initial response to Hamas' October 7 attack was just; its current conduct of the war is causing greater evils than the one it seeks to eliminate. It should allow far more humanitarian aid into Gaza under strict control and agree to stop fighting if the United Nations will send in a peace-keeping force to prevent Hamas from attacking Israel again. An international conference should also be convened to work out a solution to the whole Palestinian situation, the security of Israel and a just peace in the Middle East. (Brennan 2024)

Starting in November, American bishops also added the aspect of fighting antisemitism in reaction

to its significant rise in the U.S., particularly on a number of elite college campuses. Particularly concerning was the lack of distinction between Jews and the State of Israel among many protesters, which endangers the peaceful existence of the Jewish community in the U.S. Notably, Cardinal Timothy Dolan strongly condemned the escalation of religious hatred, highlighting that recent events, including the murder of a six-year-old Muslim boy in Chicago and the celebratory responses to the Hamas attacks, have intensified fears among Jewish communities. Dolan emphasized that such hatred is fundamentally against Catholic teachings, which hold that every human life is of incalculable worth and that violence only begets more violence, not justice (Dolan 2023b). Cardinal Wilton Gregory of Washington, D.C., also spoke out in reaction to the threats posed to some synagogues in the area. He said the following:

There is no excuse for bullying or harassing people because of their religious or ethnic identity. Such actions are in stark contradiction to our national and moral principles, and they only increase the environment of violence of the present moment. (Catholic Standard 2023)

Cardinal Gregory had been urging Catholics to be “outraged” by the rising antisemitism already for several years. He stressed that Catholics must acknowledge and confront the Church’s historical role in the persecution of Jews and advocate against antisemitism as a distinct and serious issue, referring to Pope Francis’s stance that a true Christian cannot be an antisemite (O’Loughlin 2022). These voices show that on the level of the American dioceses, the implications of the Hamas attack and the war in Gaza were addressed in the spirit of recognizing the special bond to the Jewish people and making a commitment to combat antisemitism.

As the war in Gaza continued, however, the prevailing Christian perspective emphasized the need for the equal recognition of all victims’ suffering, asserting that while Israel has the right to self-defense, the military operations in Gaza posed excessive risks to civilians. Consequently, many Christian leaders have over time increasingly called for peace, demanding a ceasefire, humanitarian aid for Gaza, and the release of the hostages.^[8] Pope Francis, for example, in more than 30 statements since 7 October, has consistently advocated for peace but has not elaborated on the practical ways of achieving it.

3.4. Churches in the Holy Land

The voices from the leaders of the Churches in the Holy Land offer another valuable perspective, as they are embedded in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and because of the ecumenical efforts to find a common Christian voice to address the State of Israel, Jewish people, and Christians globally. The Catholic Church has attempted to advocate for other Christians in the Holy Land, which is reflected in the engagement of the Latin Patriarch in cooperation with other Christian leaders.

Heads of Churches in the Holy Land have issued several statements regarding the current conflict in Gaza, emphasizing the need for peace, justice, and humanitarian aid. Immediately on 7 October 2023, the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem called for peace and justice amidst the unfolding violence. They condemned any acts targeting civilians and appealed for an immediate cessation of violence, urging political leaders to engage in sincere dialogue to achieve lasting solutions based on justice and human rights (Custodia Terrae Sanctae 2023).^[9]

A week later, following an emergency meeting on 13 October, the Church leaders highlighted the escalating humanitarian crisis in Gaza, condemning the forced evacuation orders and the deprivation of the entire population of necessities like electricity, water, fuel, food, and medicine. They called on Israel and the international community to allow humanitarian supplies into Gaza and urged all parties to de-escalate the conflict to save innocent lives (World Council of Churches

2023). After Israeli airstrikes near St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza, which resulted in civilian casualties, including children, the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches, joined by the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, condemned the attack and called for restraint and the protection of civilians (Watkins 2023).^[10] The patriarchs of the Jerusalem Churches jointly expressed concern over military attacks on civilians, as reflected in their 1 March statement condemning the massacre of civilians conducted while residents of Gaza gathered for food aid (World Council of Churches 2024).^[11] Church leaders in the Holy Land have repeatedly spoken about the difficult situation, called for peace, and even in the case of the Latin Patriarch visited the faithful in Gaza (Pizzaballa 2024).

4. Contrasting Frames: Jews and Catholics in Dialogue

Apart from loyalty to Christians in the Holy Land, the Catholic Church has attempted to remain faithful to its commitment to dialogue with the Jewish people in and outside of the State of Israel. An exchange of open letters between Pope Francis and Jewish leaders reflects this engagement.

4.1. Framing the Hamas Attack as a Pogrom

Approximately a month after the Hamas attack and two weeks after the beginning of the IDF's ground offensive in Gaza, Jewish leaders published a letter (An Open Letter to His Holiness 2023) signed by prominent figures in the Jewish–Catholic dialogue such as Karma Ben Johanan,^[12] Malka Zeiger Simkovich,^[13] Rabbi Jehoshua Ahrens,^[14] Rabbi Yitz Greenberg,^[15] Rabbi David Meyer^[16], and 400 other rabbis and intellectuals. They described the Hamas attack as “the most horrific attack on Jews since the Holocaust” and viewed it primarily as an act of antisemitism, calling it a “full-fledged pogrom”. Such framing depicts the Hamas attack as a continuation of the history of repeated waves of persecutions and discrimination based on Judeophobia, anti-Judaism, and antisemitism.

Catholic statements frame it differently. Viewing the Hamas attack through the lens of the Holocaust appears to be absent from the Catholic leaders' interpretations of the attack, although the American bishops acknowledge the rise in antisemitism and include this dimension in their statements. Pope Francis appears to view the Hamas attack and the war from the perspective of war and violence in general, advocating for a ceasefire and peace and rejecting all forms of violence. The larger historical framework implied here would be the post-World War II struggle to maintain world peace and avoid another global war. Taking into consideration that the Second Vatican Council was largely a response to the war and an attempt to find a nonviolent way forward, fostering mutual respect and peace among humans, this is not surprising.^[17] Since that time, the popes have concentrated on containing conflicts. John Paul II focused his diplomatic efforts on overthrowing the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, which was perceived as the source of the Cold War. Marked by a direct contact with the Holocaust, he is considered the pope who made the most significant contribution toward improving Catholic–Jewish relations (Ogilvie 2023). He also repeatedly highlighted the unrevoked covenant of God with the Jewish people. Francis calls for social justice and nonviolence, focusing on the countries with the most acute crises and various oppressed groups. His views are to some extent impacted by the liberation theology, some elements of which “demean Judaism, relativize the divine covenantal relationship with the Jewish people, and identify the people of Israel as oppressors” (Ogilvie 2023). Although it is difficult to accuse Francis of demeaning Judaism, etc., he does take a more pro-Palestinian stand. For example, when he visited the West Bank in 2014, he prayed at the security barrier beneath graffiti that read “Free Palestine,” which was an iconic pro-Palestinian moment, lending legitimacy to the Palestinian cause (Ibidem). Following the logic of working for global peace and the oppressed, the narrative expressed by numerous Catholic leaders, including Pope Francis, implies that the Hamas attack should be seen in the framework of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and perhaps detached from the history of antisemitism. While the anti-Jewish reactions to the attack in the U.S. are seen

as antisemitic, the attack itself is not presented as a pogrom but rather a part of the ongoing conflict.^[18]

The Jewish authors of the letter see the attack through the lens of the centuries-long threat of antisemitism, now culminating in Hamas' "genocidal crime". They see the attack as an assault on Israel's independence and very existence, in accordance with Hamas' intentions expressed in its statute.^[19] They also highlight the antisemitic reactions to the attack from around the world, as manifested in celebrations of the Hamas attack as "a legitimate act of resistance for Palestinian liberation" and blaming the massacre and the war on the Jews collectively (An Open Letter to His Holiness 2023). Given such a strong threat not only to Israel but also to Jews around the world, the signatories of the letter beg their Catholic counterparts "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 self-defense, as tragic and heartbreaking as they are." Additionally, the letter asks for participation in memorializing the victims of the 7 October massacre (not specified whether this means remembering the victims by urging the release of hostages and recognizing Jewish sense of vulnerability or ritualized and institutionalized memorialization), advocacy for the release of hostages, and recognition of the Jewish community's vulnerability. In their perspective, Israel, Israelis, and Jews globally are seen as the victim and Hamas as the perpetrator of terror and violence. They also consider the situation as part of a wider conflict and Israel being surrounded by enemies—Hezbollah, Iran, and their proxies. In the Holy See's responses to the Hamas attack, there was limited explicit focus on Israel's right to exist or on acknowledging the "distress and anguish of Jews all over the world". Instead, the primary emphasis was placed on the suffering of innocent civilians, with advocacy for the release of the hostages. This humanitarian perspective was evident in calls for a ceasefire, humanitarian aid, and the protection of all civilians affected by the conflict (Castellano Lubov 2023).

The letter makes a strong point in reminding the Catholic community of their responsibility to intervene on behalf of the Jewish people in fighting antisemitism. Although directed to the Catholic Church, these expectations likely reflect the broader international Jewish community's sentiments towards their Christian counterparts. Many Jewish communities felt abandoned and threatened as a result of the conflict (Silow-Carroll 2023), and those involved in the dialogue wanted to see concrete actions from their Catholic counterparts.^[20] They see the Catholic Church as a leader of the fight against antisemitism, with the potential to inspire other Churches to address the Jewish people in a desirable way during these troubled times. This is why the Jewish leaders who signed "An Open Letter to His Holiness" place their hope in the Catholic Church's reactions and demand more involvement from the Church, also including political demands such as not equating Israel's violence with that perpetrated by Hamas.

4.2. Fraternity as an Answer

That letter was answered on 2 February 2024, with the "Letter of the Holy Father Francis to Jewish Brothers and Sisters in Israel" (Francis 2024b). The mere act of answering an open letter by a pope is without much precedent. The Pope begins with placing the conflict in the perspective of increased divisions around the globe, which he often calls "piecemeal world war", and speaks of hatred and violence. He refrains from calling the Hamas attack antisemitic, however. Instead, he agrees that in worldwide public opinion there are also cases of making antisemitic or anti-Judaic statements. He summarizes the crux of the Catholic position to the Jewish people in a complex statement: "The relationship that binds us to you is particular and singular, without ever obscuring, naturally, the relationship that the Church has with others and the commitment towards them too." He reaffirms the unequivocal condemnation of anti-Judaism and antisemitism as a sin, expresses concern about rising antisemitism, and renews the commitment to eradicating it. He also speaks about compassion towards the Jewish people and the hostages, hope for peace found in God, and the idea of the universal fraternity of all humans as children of God, a thought perhaps not surprising for an author of the encyclical "Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship"

(Francis 2020). The solution he proposes is to “commit ourselves to this path of friendship, solidarity and cooperation in seeking ways to repair a destroyed world, working together in every part of the world, and especially in the Holy Land, to recover the ability to see in the face of every person the image of God, in which we were created” (Francis 2024b). His attachment to the idea of universal fraternity is reiterated and emphasized by the final greetings, which he signs “fraternally”, without responding to many of the issues raised in the letter from the Jewish leaders, such as reaffirming Israel’s right to exist, distinguishing Hamas’ massacre from the civilian casualties of Israel’s war of self-defense, or participation in memorializing the victims of the 7 October massacre. However, he did affirm Israel’s right to exist on different occasions, for example, during the General Audience on 24 April 2024 (Francis 2024a).

Elsewhere, Francis makes it clear that his conceptualization of who the victims and the perpetrator are differs from that expressed by the Jewish leaders in the open letter quoted above. He repeatedly claimed that all innocent civilians on both sides of armed conflicts are the victims and that the true perpetrators are those who produce arms and feed the wars (Francis 2020, 2022a, 2023c, etc.). He also implied Israeli responsibility for the casualties in Gaza by expressing concern “about the total siege under which Palestinians are living in Gaza, where there also have been many innocent victims” and warning against extremism and terrorism that could be understood as pertaining to both parties (Francis 2023b).^[21] It is also worth mentioning that Francis did not engage in the debate on whether Israel is committing genocide in Gaza and in general abstained from using the word in this context.^[22]

4.3. Weaknesses of the Theology of Universal Fraternity

During his pontificate, Pope Francis has addressed the issue of universal human fraternity and war, peace, and violence quite often. He has presented an elaborate and coherent vision that is grounded in the views represented by the modern papacy, advocating for peace, disarmament, and peaceful conflict resolution. He can be seen, however, as going beyond the just war theory, instead claiming that no war is just but “only peace is just” (Francis and Wolton 2018). In his book, *Against War: Building a Culture of Peace* (Francis 2022a), Francis is even more bold, stating that “war is a sacrilege” and advocating for disarmament.

Although the pope has not rejected the just war theory *expressis verbis*, he has done so by his praxis (De Volder 2023) which, as suggested above, could be seen as the fruit of the gradual development of Church teachings leaning more and more towards nonviolence since the Second Vatican Council, rather than an abrupt break with the just war theory (Sniegocki 2019). At the same time, it is worth noting that Pope Francis has received considerable critique for his pacifist approach as being unfair towards victims, especially in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. His final words on war in the interview given to Matteo Bruni and Gerry O’Connell, “May the Lord have mercy on us, on all of us. Every one of us is guilty!” (Francis 2022b), coupled with the avoidance of openly blaming Russia, were not received well by many Catholics, especially those to whom Russia poses a real military threat. Even more controversial was his call to Ukraine to have the courage of the “white flag” to negotiate with Russia (Pullella 2024), words that hurt many Ukrainians defending their homeland and provoked outrage among Ukrainian officials. Ukraine’s foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, linked these words to the Vatican’s strategy of not angering Hitler during the Second World War, urging the Holy See not to repeat the mistakes of the past (Chrisafis 2024). The war in Ukraine proved to be pivotal in the Pope’s take on war (Faggioli 2022; Smytsnyuk 2023) becoming more pacifist.

As suggested above, this pivot is problematic not only in relation to the war in Ukraine but also in the context of the war in Gaza. The weak points of the Pope’s views on war and violence seem to be the lack of nuanced distinction between different kinds of violence and motivation for entering a military conflict, an insufficient reflection on the right to self-defense, and a monodimensional view on the causes of wars (human sinful nature, greed of those producing weapons). The current war

in Gaza undoubtedly exposes these weaknesses once more as the Pope calls for a ceasefire and peace without offering a deeper reflection on the causes of the conflict nor remedies for complex layers of socio-political problems, injustices, and transgressions.

The theological stance against war and violence needs to be negotiated with the Holy See's diplomatic activities and the realities on the ground to become more nuanced, taking into account the political implications of this theology. The just war theory provided space for including the particularities of a specific context and using the notions of justice and self-defense, while the pacifist approach does not seem to differentiate between various levels of responsibility for violence (individual, state, etc.), risking that the notion of justice might be compromised for the sake of peace.^[23] It ignores the complexities of the real conflicts, instead of guiding humans through the labyrinth of moral dilemmas unavoidable in a broken world.

4.4. Universal Fraternity versus Commitment to the Jewish People

Another theological tension reflected in his letter to “Jewish brothers and sisters” lies between the idea of universal fraternity and the special “bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock” (*Nostra Aetate*, 4.). Francis's pronouncements regarding universal fraternity are mostly to be found in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Francis 2020), emphasizing the interconnectedness and unity of all human beings, advocating for a world where mutual respect, dialogue, and solidarity prevail over divisions and conflicts. Such a vision naturally implies a trans-religious, trans-ethnic, and trans-national approach and requires fostering a culture of encounter and collaboration of brothers and sisters (humans) aimed at the common good.

What is the difference in relation to “the older brother”—the Jewish people? Should Catholics relate to Jewish people differently than to other brothers and sisters? What is the meaning of the spiritual bond with the Jewish people versus the bond with other humans? What are the implications of this special bond in situations when Jewish people find themselves in conflict with other brothers and sisters?

Pope Francis does not elaborate much on this issue in his theology, apart from a short passage in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Francis 2013),^[24] but his actions are of value to understand his approach. He has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to combating antisemitism, has repeatedly condemned antisemitism as contrary to Christian values, and has emphasized the historical and spiritual bond between Christians and Jews in a distinct way. He has not used similar language in relation to other religions. For example, he has not addressed Islamophobia with equal attention, although he has met with Muslim religious leaders as well and invested in building good relations, e.g., by writing a joint letter with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb (Francis and Al-Tayyeb 2019). The particularity of the bond with the Jewish people is reflected in various speeches and statements where the Pope has highlighted the importance of remembering the Holocaust, educating against hatred, and promoting interfaith dialogue to prevent antisemitism from resurfacing, as well as his numerous visits to synagogues and meetings with Jewish leaders.

One could conclude that the Pope's commitment to universal fraternity complements his efforts to fight antisemitism by promoting a worldview where prejudice and hatred have no place. However, such an approach can be criticized as idealistic and unspecific in relation to Jews and to the State of Israel. It does not offer much clarity on the practical implications of the commitment to show solidarity with the Jewish people in situations of war and violence, as was hinted by the Jewish leaders in the above-quoted letter (*An Open Letter to His Holiness* 2023). Moreover, it does not explain how Catholics should balance their loyalty to the Jewish people and Christians in the Holy Land if there is a conflict of interest or violence involved. Finally, it is problematic also when thinking about the right to self-defense when Jewish people are involved.

While some of the Catholic leaders in the Holy Land, like the former Auxiliary Bishop of Jerusalem

and Patriarchal Vicar to Jordan, Jamal Khader Daibes (today Bishop of Djibouti), are a strong voice for the rights of Palestinian Christians, attempting to craft a Catholic theology of the Land of Israel including the perspective of Palestinian people, the current situation shows that a systematic theological reflection on the Catholic theology of the Land of Israel is desperately needed.

4.5. Critique of the State of Israel and the Status of Jewish Christians

The relationship of the Church to the Jewish people and to the State of Israel is complex and multifaceted and has evolved significantly over time. For centuries, the Catholic Church had a cautious or negative (if not hostile) stance towards Zionism and the establishment of a Jewish State, primarily due to theological and political considerations stained by anti-Judaism and supersessionism. The famous audience of Theodor Herzl with Pope Pius X on 26 January 1904 summarizes the initial attitude of the Church in this matter:

We cannot give approval to this movement. We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem—but we could never sanction it. The soil of Jerusalem, if it was not always sacred, has been sanctified by the life of Jesus Christ. As the head of the Church I cannot tell you anything different. The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people. (Herzl 1960)

As mentioned above, the Vatican's official recognition of and establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel happened almost nine decades later, in 1993 (Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel 1993). This agreement marked a significant shift, normalizing relations and addressing issues related to religious freedoms, the legal status of the Church in Israel, and the protection of Christian holy sites. Moreover, it marked the shift in theological thinking about the Land of Israel and moved away from the traditional view of Jews playing a specific eschatological role. The recognition of the State of Israel was expressed in the visits of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis and their meeting with Jewish leaders. These pilgrimages to the Holy Land emphasized the importance of mutual respect and dialogue, reinforcing the commitment to peaceful and constructive relations with the State of Israel.

The Holy See focuses mainly on problems on the ground. Apart from the holy sites, one of its main concerns is ensuring the freedom of worship for Christians, which also implies their peaceful existence in the land and, ideally, peace in the area. To achieve the latter goal, it advocates for a two-state solution that ensures peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians (Francis 2013).^[25] Moreover, the Holy See has repeatedly called for a special status for Jerusalem, recognizing its significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims and advocating for the city's internationalization or at least a guarantee of access and rights for all religious communities, recognizing the challenges of the current status quo (Ferrari 1985). Its current position is not entirely clear, however. Overall, one could perhaps call the Catholic approach to Israel "critical realism" in general terms.

This reluctance to show decisive support for the State of Israel to some extent remains problematic in the context of Jewish–Christian relations. Especially in tense times, like the current war in Gaza, many Jews would like to see a stronger commitment towards supporting the State of Israel and distinguishing between the violence committed by Hamas and the IDF, and they see the criticism of Israel as too harsh or even unfounded. One of the authors of "An Open Letter to His Holiness" Karma ben Johanan, penned an earthy article titled "There is a right and wrong way for Catholics to criticize Israel," clearly explaining Jewish expectations towards the Catholic community (Ben Johanan 2024). The article was her response to an interview with Fr. David Neuhaus, S.J. (Neuhaus 2024a), which she found to be unfair and even demonizing Israel. In the article, Ben Johanan agrees with Neuhaus that it is possible to critique Israel without lapsing into antisemitism but finds his portrayal of Israeli society overly simplistic and vilifying. She argues that the

motivations for Israel's actions are complex, involving genuine security concerns rather than vengeance alone. Ben Johanan calls for a more nuanced and fair analysis that acknowledges Israel's existential threats alongside its moral challenges.

In his interview, Neuhaus criticizes Israeli and Palestinian nationalism as the source of the conflict and condemns one-sided narratives of the situation, urging for a more balanced perspective that considers the suffering and legitimate aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians. He underlines the harmful role of the current government in the escalation of the conflict, stating that “what was once considered extremist racism rearing its head at the margins of Israeli society has become strategies proposed by government ministers, for those one-time extremists are now the ruling elites.” The criticism of the government, however, does not seem to be the bone of contention with Ben Johanan but rather Neuhaus' way of speaking about the Israeli response to the Hamas attack:

While the grief and loss of Israelis are very real, there is nonetheless an ongoing exploitation of their emotional state by the media, which continually emphasizes that they are the victims, to justify the war, and so the narrative in the media must be confined to Oct. 7, Israeli mourning, loss and the trauma of the ongoing hostage crisis. There is no place left in the Israeli narrative for what might be happening in Gaza. (Neuhaus 2024a)

It seems that these were the words that stirred a reaction in Ben Johanan, who asks the following:

Is this war all about intergenerational trauma and revenge, about some sort of a psychological breakdown in the Jewish-Israeli psyche—and nothing more? Was Father Neuhaus unable to find or give voice to one rational reason that drove Israel to send her sons and daughters to kill and be killed, en masse, in a seemingly endless war? I am happy to provide a partial list of serious reasons for such actions, which do not seem to derive from the depths of our collective and agonizing soul but rather, from objective threats to Israeli lives. (Ben Johanan 2024)

She then proceeds to list the actual threats faced by Israel and concludes the article with an expression of the desired support and critique expected from the Catholic community:

Israelis, like all peoples, are both fragile and sinful, both victims and perpetrators, both reasonable and emotional. Like the citizens of other nations, they make terrible mistakes and are capable of horrible things, and they need their friends to tell them so and to help them get back on the right track. But these friends will usually try to see them as complex and intelligent people who can think for themselves and whose motives are multi-dimensional, not flat. They will usually understand the existential complexity of the situation of their counterparts and then offer advice, even critical advice, rather than paternalistically explain away their friends' actions as driven by paranoid tantrums of wounded animals or brainwashed masses. This sort of advice is what we are still hoping to receive from our Catholic friends. (Ben Johanan 2024)

The problem with the critique of Neuhaus is that he is not only a Catholic patronizing “wounded animals or brainwashed masses,” he is a fellow Israeli, a Jew who converted to Catholicism. Ben Johanan fails to see that he might be speaking at least partly from an internal perspective of an Israeli criticizing his own country's mistakes and the shortcoming of his people. In this sense, it seems incorrect to make conclusions about the Catholic way of criticizing Israel based on this specific interview as the title might suggest. Instead, it seems that Ben Johanan might be excluding Neuhaus from the Israeli collective. She constructs her argument using dichotomies. She speaks

on behalf of Israelis, defending them from unfair Catholic critique by using such statements as “we Israelis must do everything we can to learn from our critics” (Israel versus its critics, Neuhaus being the latter) and juxtaposing Israelis and their friends (again Neuhaus being the latter) in the last paragraph. This phrasing places Neuhaus outside of Israeli society and ignores his Israeli identity.

This example is significant because it brings to the fore the experience of Israeli Catholics functioning under the aegis of the Saint James Vicariate (and other Christians), who are a small community but are also of concern to Catholics in the scope of Jewish–Catholic relations. After all, many of them claim to be both, and in situations of acute crisis like the war in Gaza their views are particularly important precisely because they participate in both a Jewish–Israeli and a Christian universe. Neuhaus is an example of such a voice.[\[26\]](#)

The interview with Neuhaus is also interesting because of his take on the role of Pope Francis in the conflict. He highlights Francis’ courage to maintain his position and demand a ceasefire:

The Holy Father is courageously sticking to his guns despite not only Israeli pushback but also criticism from the Jewish world. The chief rabbi of South Africa released a strident video attacking the pope. Chief Rabbi Lau of Israel sent a letter condemning the pope’s position. In a more respectful tone, over 400 Jews engaged in dialogue with the church and asked the pope for more understanding of Jewish fears. The pope has provoked fury for pointing to a parallelism between the terror used by Hamas on Oct. 7 and the terror used by the Israeli army since then. He is rejecting the claim that the conflict began with Hamas’s attack and Israel then responded in legitimate self-defense. (Neuhaus 2024a)

Neuhaus defends the Pope’s actions and words. He sees them as a deep commitment to the Jewish people but reminds them that “friends can disagree”. When assessing Catholic relations to the State of Israel, he bluntly states the following:

Jewish-Catholic relations must not be held hostage to Israel’s attempts to legitimate its policies and practices. A distinction must be made between the Jewish people and the State of Israel. As Catholics, we are committed to relationship, based upon our shared heritage and our remorse for a shameful past, but that cannot compromise our call for justice for the Palestinian people. (Neuhaus 2024a)

In that sense, he also offers a practical reflection on how to interpret Francis’s teachings on universal fraternity versus the commitment to the relationship with Jewish people, highlighting the necessity of remaining loyal to both Israeli Jews and Palestinians in the name of peace and justice. That implies considering the special relationship with the Jewish people mostly a “spiritual bond” but detaching it from the reality of political conflict on the ground where the principle of universal fraternity is to be applied to both parties involved. In the context of the Hamas attack and the war in Gaza, it might denote condemning all violence and terror equally, as Pope Francis did. Such an approach is bound to provoke tensions with the Jewish people (and some Christians), who see the Hamas attack as primarily antisemitic and the war in Gaza as a logical consequence of that attack (self-defense and retaliation). Perhaps such tensions are unavoidable because of the special status of Israel, a land holy to Jews and Christians that is at the same time a scene of violence that has to be addressed by the Catholic Church in the same way it addresses violence elsewhere.

5. Conclusions

As shown in this article, the main challenges in the institutional Jewish–Catholic dialogue

resurfacing in the aftermath of the Hamas attack on 7 October and the ensuing war in Gaza are the diverse framings of the context and meaning of the attack and war among Jews and Catholics and the resulting incommensurability of the Catholic responses to Jewish expectations. Moreover, on the Catholic side, several issues require further reflection and elaboration, including its theology of war and violence so that it would address the position of the victim and the right to self-defense, commitment to the Jewish people versus universal fraternity, and relations with the State of Israel versus loyalty to Christians in the Holy Land. To achieve the latter, a systematic theological reflection on the Jewish relation to the Land of Israel and the meaning of their return there is necessary. Further research is urgently needed to understand the broader ramifications of the above-mentioned tensions in the Catholic and Jewish communities worldwide. Understanding the situation on the ground, especially the theologies of the religious other among Palestinian Christians and Israeli Jews, would be of crucial importance. Such a study would allow the identification of key prejudices that stand in the way of peace through perpetuating negative images of the religious other (for example, Jews as Christ killers and accursed, Palestinian Christians as antisemitic enemies of the State of Israel, etc.). This sort of diagnosis would make it possible to work towards changing these views, which would contribute to improving the relations between these groups. Moreover, in the context of the Holy Land, understanding the impact of Palestinian nationalism and Islamic extremism on the peace process is of crucial importance.

In the face of such challenges, the Catholic Church needs not only to employ interfaith diplomacy and conflict management at the highest echelons of the hierarchy but also to ensure the fostering of the theology of dialogue, especially clarifying the above-mentioned points of tension about the Jewish people. Consequently, these theological stances need to be communicated to the broader Catholic community through written documents and in a more popular way be incorporated into oral communications such as interviews, homilies, etc. Finally, there is an urgent need to implement such developments to ensure that Jewish–Catholic relations are built on solid foundations and go beyond superficial assertions of spiritual brotherhood, towards building bridges and working together for peace and the repair of the world.

As one of the qualities of good leadership is the ability to contain conflicts, it should be hoped that the containing of the current escalation will be supported by the leadership figures (hierarchs, theologians, intellectuals, activists, etc.) involved in the Jewish–Catholic dialogue. The current war in Gaza is testing many in that regard, yet their continued discussions in spite of the results sometimes being disappointing for one or both parties allow one to hope for a constructive future of this dialogue.

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