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Rabbi Alaluf: Pope Francis' letter to the Jewish people has put an end to a 'crisis'

David Neuhaus, S.J. | Guy Alaluf
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On Feb. 2, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, Pope Francis released a letter to “Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel.” This was a personal letter sent to a Jewish Israeli professor who had initiated an appeal to the pope, expressing Jewish discomfort with his position on the ongoing war in Gaza. The pope’s response is noteworthy for its tone of closeness to the Jews in Israel during these dark times, without forgoing his continuing concern for the Palestinians, especially those in Gaza, and their fate.

Rabbi Guy Alaluf, an Orthodox Israeli rabbi and teacher, penned a reaction to the Holy Father’s letter, published on Feb. 5 in Hebrew in the Israeli newspaper Makor Rishon. On reading the original, I asked Rabbi Alaluf whether it might be interesting to translate his article into English and offer it to Catholic readers seeking to understand the current state of Jewish-Catholic relations. He agreed not only to a translation but also slightly amended the article for these readers.

Rabbi Alaluf’s response to the pope, written within the context of the modern friendship Jews and Catholics share, recognizes that friendship must leave room for difference of opinion. He appreciates that the pope seeks to refocus the dialogue between Jews and Catholics on the profound spiritual heritage they share, on the astonishing friendship they have nourished in the past decades since the publication of “Nostra Aetate” in 1965, and on a shared vision for a world in which there will be no more war and where all live in freedom, equality and peace.

Who would have thought in centuries gone by that Catholics and Jews would one day sit together in friendship and enduring conversation about their identities, missions and destinies? This miraculous transformation of a relationship that was too often bitter holds out hope for relationships that are now so poisoned with rancor and steeped in hatred. The pope repeatedly referred to the Palestinians in his letter. His concern for them, in Gaza and throughout the Holy Land, cannot be ignored within the Jewish-Catholic friendship. Friends are called to join hands and work together to repair a broken world, a brokenness that is so shockingly manifest in Gaza today. Rabbi Alaluf responds with a vision of a Holy Land, Israel/Palestine, that is home to both Jews and Palestinians.

In addressing his Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel, the pope is insisting on friendship and conversation that points to a better future for the Holy Land. Rabbi Alaluf's taking up the challenge of responding offers a deepening of the friendship, taking the conversation forward.

His essay appears in its entirety below.

—David Neuhaus, S.J.

Affirming the relationship with the Jewish people in a time of war

From an Israeli perspective, Pope Francis' response to the Israel-Gaza war has definitely been disappointing. The pope, alongside constantly calling for the release of the Israeli hostages held in Gaza, has also called for an immediate cease-fire. Furthermore, he repeatedly compared the actions of Hamas to the actions of the State of Israel, even referring to Israel's conduct as "terrorism," parallel to that of Hamas, and refused to retract this even when faced with the furious reactions of the State of Israel.

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As someone who follows the activities and writings of the pope, I have not at all been surprised. Pope Francis takes a consistent line regarding violent conflicts around the world—a line that is completely opposed to any war and treats any action that harms body and soul as terrorism. Thus, for example, in the Russia-Ukraine war, the pope refused to support Ukraine's offensive actions and called for an immediate end to the war. The Ukrainians were enraged at the pope's position, which refused to distinguish between pure evil and unfortunate necessity, just like the Israelis who were enraged at him for similar reasons.

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This position of the pope is not at all self-evident when it comes to the doctrine of the Catholic Church. The church has supported a "just war theory" for over a thousand years and more, even going back to the days of the church fathers. In fact, Catholic doctrine still recognizes today a just war theory as is stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (No. 2309). Four conditions are presented there for waging a just war:

1. The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain;
2. all other means of putting an end to the aggression must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;
3. there must be serious prospects of success;
4. the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.

Of course, it is possible to question whether the State of Israel meets these justifications for a just war (it seems that the fourth condition is the most complex). However, for the pope, it would seem that this argumentation does not matter. He denies war in any form. One must remember that Francis is not alone in this. Before him, John Paul II, the pope who headed the church for almost three decades, expressed firm opposition to the Gulf War; he had previously said that he was not at all sure that in a technological world with deadly weapons like ours, a just war is even possible.

At first glance, it seemed that in relation to the war in Gaza, the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the State of Israel was a conversation between two deaf partners. Tweet this

At first glance, it seemed that in relation to the war in Gaza, the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the State of Israel was a conversation between two deaf partners. The Israelis did not understand why the pope was criticizing them, when in fact he was insisting on his opposition to all war in any form. It might indeed be possible to critique the moral position of the pope with regard to a just war, but his position should not be attributed to discrimination against the State of Israel.

As time went on, however, Israelis, as well as many Jews from around the world, began to suspect that there might be something more sinister in the background to the pope's position on the war in Gaza. Jews began asking themselves whether the pope was being critical not only of the State of Israel, but of the Jewish people as a whole. Could it be that the hostility of the head of the Catholic Church stemmed from age-old motives concerning Jewish-Christian relations going back to darker periods in their shared history?

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Many appeals were sent to the pope by high-ranking Jews around the world, and they went unanswered. It began to seem that relations between the Jews and the Catholic Church were facing a crisis the likes of which had not been seen since the beginning of a new age of relations about 60 years ago, inaugurated in the light of the Second Vatican Council.

In his letter to "my Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel," the pope has put an end to this supposed crisis. Pope Francis expressed empathy for the Jews living in Israel and their pain following the atrocities they had experienced on Oct. 7, 2023. Significantly, he proclaimed the continuation of an uncompromising war against anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, and underlined the unique relationship that the Catholic Church has with the Jewish people, a relationship that is more precious than any particular political circumstance.

Of particular note was the fact that this personal letter was addressed to Dr. Karma Ben Yohanan at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She, together with colleagues, had drafted a painful letter, sent to the pope on Nov. 12, 2023. The letter was signed by about 450 rabbis and scholars from around the Jewish world. The pope chose to respond specifically to his Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel. I think it might imply a recognition of the Jewish people's belonging to the Land of Israel—a belonging that both Jewish and Christian Scriptures attest to without a shadow of a doubt. Moreover, this belonging does not lessen the belonging of the Palestinians to this same land.

Pope Francis, in this letter, makes his position clear: He negates all discriminatory attitudes towards Jews. Contrary to them, he recognizes and underlines the unique relationship between Judaism, the Jewish people and the Catholic Church. His criticism of the State of Israel does not stem from anti-Jewish attitudes but from completely different motives, consistent with his attitude towards all conflicts in the world. One might criticize this attitude, but it should not be confused with the question of the Catholic Church's relationship with the Jewish people.

The pope asks us, as Jews and Israelis, to differentiate between the religious, theological and spiritual dimensions of our relationship and the political, worldly and diplomatic dimensions. I am not sure whether Israeli society wants to do this or is even capable of doing it. However, at the very least we should allow him to make such a separation himself. It may not currently meet the immediate interests of the State of Israel, but it certainly does serve the long-term interests of the Jewish people.

David Neuhaus, S.J., is a Jesuit priest who teaches Scripture in Israel and Palestine. He has been a long-term member of the Holy Land Catholic Church's Justice and Peace Commission. Born in South Africa during the apartheid era, he has lived most of his life in Israel and is an Israeli citizen.

Guy Alaluf

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