

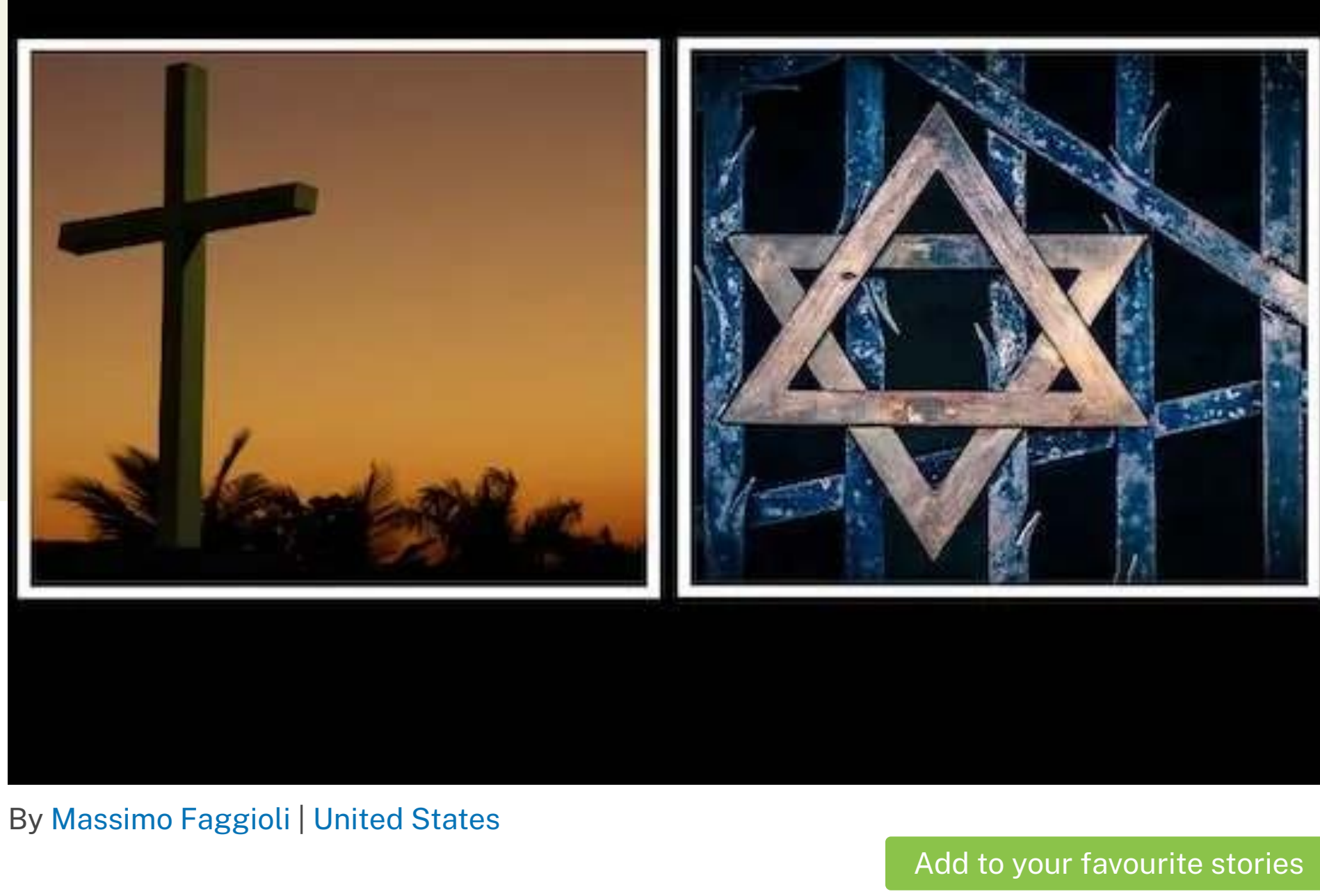
## SIGNS OF THE TIMES

By Massimo Faggioli

January 4, 2024

# The effects of the Israel-Hamas war on Jewish-Catholic relations

Revisiting the theological and political memories of the Holocaust



By Massimo Faggioli | United States

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Pope Francis' annual New Year address to foreign ambassadors accredited to the Holy See will be extremely important this year, coming in the midst of Israel's devastating military offensive in Gaza in retaliation to the vicious attack that Hamas launched against its civilians on October 7th.

The pope's speech, which he delivers to the diplomats next Monday, will be even more important than the one he gave after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. That's because there are also delicate theological issues at stake this time, including the legacy of *Nostra aetate*, the Vatican II Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (1965), and the post-conciliar developments in Jewish-Catholic relations.

Those relations have changed since last October in ways never before. For instance, when Al Qaeda attacked the United States in September 2001 the reception of *Nostra aetate* was not interrupted. The 9/11 attacks and the US "war on terror" that followed came after the highest phase in the rapprochement between Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam under the incredibly authoritative (on that matter) mantle of John Paul II (from his 1980 [speech in Mainz](#) to his May 2001 trip to Syria). The Polish pope also took a very clear position against the attempts of some who saw the US-led wars in Iraq I (1991), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq II (2003) as a crusade against Muslims.

Neither did the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 put Jewish-Catholic relations directly on the table, even though the issue of Europe's divided "political memories" of World War II and the Holocaust had already begun to emerge and Francis applied the term "genocide" to what Russia was doing in Ukraine.

### Holy See-Israeli relations at an all-time low

According to a group of [Palestinians](#) who met privately with him on November 22 at his Casa Santa Marta residence, the Jesuit pope also called Israel's offensive against Gaza "a genocide". Even though the Vatican issued a denial, the alleged comment has plunged relations between the Holy See and Israel to an all-time low. *It's no surprise that in these tragic circumstances* there were no celebrations to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the "Fundamental Agreement between the [Holy See and the State of Israel](#)" (December 30, 1993).

Since the horrible events of this past October 7 and their aftermath, the coordinates for the [Catholic Church's relations](#) with Judaism and Islam have changed a great deal. And all this is taking place during the pontificate of the first non-European pope in modern times, one whose relationship with Europe is much more detached compared to that of previous popes. Part of this includes a break with the [historical-political narratives](#) that Western Europeans have told themselves since 1945, including their narrative on the Holocaust.

The current crisis between the Abrahamic religions and their fractional statual-political representations (the Vatican, Israel, the Arab states and Iran) comes at a moment when democracies are declining around the globe. Even worse, it's also occurring as we witness a decline in the liberal-democratic content of political systems in countries like Russia, Turkey and India where one religion plays a central role in the ethno-nationalist narratives (but also in Israel, Hungary, the United States). In addition, Francis and his aides are dealing with a different kind of State of Israel than the one with which John Paul II opened full diplomatic relations in 1993.

The Catholic Church's most urgent problem concerning its relations with Judaism and Islam is to protect all that has been gained since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and its aftermath. The prospect that Israel could "devalue, undermine and ultimately destroy the meaning and serviceability of the Holocaust", as Tony Judt said in his [2012 book](#) with Timothy Snyder, is also big problem also for the Church, which has become more global.

"The farther away you get from the shores of the United States, the more Israel's behavior looks like simply political exploitation of a victim narrative," Judt wrote. "Eventually, of course, you get so far away that you arrive in countries and continents – east Asia, Africa – where the Holocaust itself is an unfamiliar abstraction".

### Walking a dangerous and very fine line

The Catholic Church, the Holy See, the Vatican, the pope, and the local Catholic Churches represent not only dramatically different levels of authority to address the issue, but they also represent different views about where the issue is itself - the relations between the Catholic Church, the Jews, and Israel. Just take a look at the social media accounts of Catholics from the Middle East and the Arab world (laypeople, clergy, monks) and you will quickly see how serious the situation has become.

The pope, the Holy See, and the Catholic Church must now walk a dangerous and very fine line. On the one hand, it is essential not give one inch to the old forms of anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic sentiments that are resurfacing. There is a difference between anti-Zionism, anti-Judaism, and anti-Semitism, but their mutual boundaries have shifted. It is imperative to defend *Nostra aetate* and its doctrinal augmentations made possible by all the popes since Vatican II – a [major shift](#) in Catholic teaching that was also made possible in the early 1960s when Catholics began reckoning with their responsibility for the Holocaust.

On the other hand, Catholicism must remain alert about the danger, which we see often in our political debates in the West, of the instrumentalization and ultimately the devaluation of the meaning of the Holocaust. This is the consequence of a "strategic philosemitism, parasitic on old antisemitic stereotypes", as [Pankaj Mishra](#) put it in a recent essay. The Catholic tradition can be affected (if it has not been already) by the rejection and skepticism of the public pedagogy of "never forget" as an expression of a political "memorialization" of the Shoah. This is a serious risk for the preservation of what the Church has learned theologically from the Shoah.

### Weighing the words and gestures of a non-European pope

Another challenge the Church faces with having a non-European pope is keeping alive the lessons of the tragedies of anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust *also* as a theological crime, without being swept away by the decay of the "political memories" of the Holocaust as part of the civil religion in Europe and the West. Because these political memories of the Holocaust have made the political elites in the West indifferent or callously cynical to the fate of innocent Palestinians. As Masha Gessen put it in a recent controversial essay, the politics of memory of the Holocaust in Europe obscures what we see in Israel and Gaza today. A pope like Francis who looks at the West with an evident detachment is in a unique position to reassess the relationship between political memories of the Holocaust and the ecclesial, theological tradition on the [Holocaust](#).

The pope has a very important and unique role to play, but it is also a treacherous one. In his "[Urbi et Orbi](#)" Message on Christmas Day, Francis used the term "little Jesuses" to describe Palestinian children being killed in the current war:

In the Scriptures, the Prince of Peace is opposed by the "Prince of this world" (*Jn* 12:31), who, by sowing the seeds of death, plots against the Lord, 2<sup>nd</sup> the lover of life" (cf. *Wis* 11:26). We see this played out in Bethlehem, where the birth of the Savior is followed by the slaughter of the innocents. How many innocents are being slaughtered in our world! In their mothers' wombs, in odysseys undertaken in desperation and in search of hope, in the lives of all those little ones whose childhood has been devastated by [war](#). They are the little Jesuses of today, these little ones whose childhood has been devastated by war.

Those who are committed to Jewish-Catholic dialogue worry about the possible consequences of the pope referring to Palestinian children as "little Jesuses". Does this then mean that the Israeli Defense Forces, the State of Israel, and -by extension - the Jewish people, are directly responsible for the death of these "little Jesuses"? That would hark back to the historical accusations of deicide, which *Nostra aetate* strongly repudiated.

Yet, [Francis](#) cannot be credibly be accused of reversing the teaching of this important Vatican II document, the first conciliar text he cited at the start of his pontificate in March 2013. But in light of what is happening in Gaza, every word he utters matters, especially given the silence of many [Western leaders](#), including Joe Biden, the second-ever Catholic to be president of the United States.

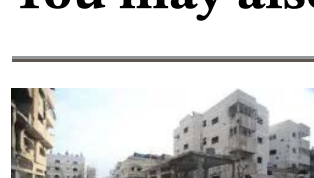
One of the lessons the Holy See learned in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that the papacy and the Church can never again become silent, and --even less --look complicit in the face of murderous ethno-nationalism. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the fog of war has become the smog of cyber and information warfare – a 24/7 cycle of crowdsourced disinformation and propaganda that makes it almost impossible to avoid seeing images and videos of conflicts, but even more difficult to know the truth of what is happening.

The Holy See has resources to cut through that smog. The problem is what to say and how to say it. The Church needs to defend the theological gains of the post-World War II period from the denial and relativization of the Holocaust, and that means defending the right of Israel to exist and defend itself. But at the same time the Church needs to detach itself from the instrumental use of the memory of the Holocaust, and it must be free to criticize Israel's policies without being accused of anti-Semitism, bigotry, and to have learned nothing from the Holocaust.

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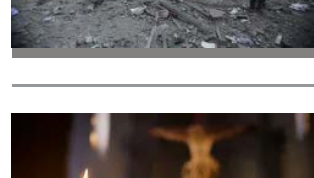
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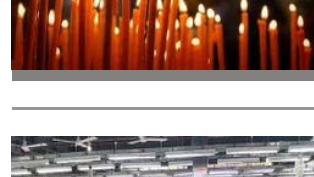
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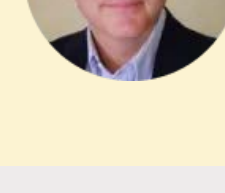
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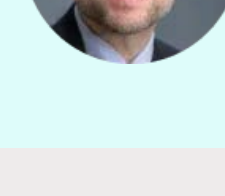
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