

# Those who attack Jews are also attacking us!

## On the Empty Spaces in the Pope's Letter to the Jews

<https://www.herder.de/communio/gesellschaft/zu-den-leerstellen-im-brief-des-papstes-an-die-juden-wer-juden-angreift-greift-auch-uns-an/> *Communio Online*, February 8, 2024. Unofficial translation.

It took Pope Francis three months to respond to a letter from more than 400 Jewish scholars and rabbis on the Hamas terrorist attack. In it he offers lots of words but avoids mentioning the horse and rider. In this way, he gambles away trust in the Christian-Jewish dialogue.

By Gregor Maria Hoff

Even the first statements out of the Vatican were suspect. After Hamas' terrorist attack on Israel on October 7 last year, mourning for the victims and bewilderment at the brutality of the massacres were mixed with an all-encompassing perspective on the multi-layered circumstances and complex causes of a conflict that had escalated to an unprecedented level. Islamist terrorists murdered Jews wherever they could get their hands on them. They slaughtered, raped, kidnapped. Genocidal violence (Dan Diner) struck Israel with unrestrained brutality and resounding force. The Vatican also joined in the worldwide horror. However, the reactions from Rome, including those of the Pope, were marked by a different tone. Concern for peace in the Middle East was combined with a protective view of Christians in the Holy Land. Understandable – if it hadn't been for the lack of an unequivocal condemnation of actions like those of the perpetrators who were responsible for 10/7.

Was Israel to be held culpable from the point of view of Rome? The fact that the question arose for many Jews is a warning sign for Vatican diplomacy and remains a danger for all future initiatives in Jewish-Catholic dialogue. Since the Second Vatican Council, this dialogue has not only drastically changed the Church's teaching, but above all built up Jewish trust in the Roman Church's leadership.

Thus, in November of last year, more than four hundred Jewish scholars and rabbis turned to the Pope. They asked Francis for a strong indication of his loyalty to Israel and Judaism – including an unequivocal statement about who is responsible for the barbaric escalation of violence. They had to wait four months for an answer. Now it is available. Why did the Holy Father take so long? Because he had to struggle with his position? And has he now found a clarity that it doesn't just need from a Jewish perspective? Given the horror of October 7, how can it be that after the Shoah a pope hesitates to say clearly what must be said?

### **The Pope's letter is worth linguistic study.**

Responding in a peace-making tone, embraced to its conclusion, it is interesting that one must look into semantic hiding places [of the letter] to find the Pope's opinion. What matters here is what the Pope *does not* say – a precarious double strategy, especially in the Catholic treatment of Judaism. There is no question that the Church is on Israel's side. But how? The Pope's two-page letter, his first written statement, begins with a global political classification. Wars are on the rise around the world. "Unfortunately, the Holy Land has not been spared this pain either, and since October 7 it too has been caught in a spiral of unprecedented violence. My heart is torn at the sight of what is happening in the Holy Land, by the power of so much division and so much hatred."

## Linguistic-political de-differentiation

Hair-Splitting? The semantic neutralization of Hamas terror achieves success in the contextualization with which Francis classifies 10/7 as a byproduct of his theory of new world wars. Against this background, the Pope's emotional world takes shape. He wishes in this way to express his "special closeness and affection for the peoples who inhabit the land that is witness to the history of Revelation." What sounds pastoral and human amounts to a linguistic-political de-differentiation. As throughout the entire text, what is missing is what determines the direction of the letter: naming the horse and rider in this war. Who attacked and who defended themselves? The immeasurable suffering of the people in the Gaza Strip must be taken into account by the Pope, but not at the price of concealing what triggered it and who had directed and still directs the course of action in Gaza. It is Hamas that has declared the ongoing war against Israel and determines the logic of its events. You don't have to look into the abysses of their tunnels and the weapons depots in hospitals.

This makes the Pope's commitment to bind the Church to Judaism all the more important. But here, too, Francis is cautiously circumscribed. In fact, "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." What is theoretically true in terms of principle amounts to relativization in the given context. The Pope wants to make up for it on a humanitarian level. But what does this mean in concrete terms in the face of Israel's struggle for existence? The international community is increasingly distancing itself. South Africa has filed a complaint with the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Israel as a state and Jewish people worldwide are increasingly alone. Against this backdrop, the word *relationship* acquires a [certain] tone. The reference to the Church's "unique relationship" with Judaism provides a basic insight into Jewish-Catholic dialogue. There is no church without Judaism. But what does this commitment mean when it comes to the loyalty that is offered in an emergency? Theologically, Francis has set a milestone with his mnemonic that God continues to work among the people of the old covenant. But what does that mean for the common life of the Church and Israel in covenant now?

At this point, the rhetorical address of the Pope's letter is of interest. Francis speaks of *her* and *us*. You Jews. We Christians. Religiously correct, no question. But if Judaism is not merely a counterpart for the Church, but is part of Christian identity, shouldn't we also draw linguistic consequences from this? For example, this one: Whoever attacks Jews also attacks us! Not only because of Jesus Christ and the Apostles and Mary, but because we see ourselves as God's common people of Jews and Christians. This insight, which was achieved in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, should be robust in terms of religious policy.

Like John Paul II, Francis prayed at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. It is necessary to remember this in order to demand what seems to be increasingly lost in the Vatican: that more than mere expressions of sympathy are needed if we do not want to destroy the basis of trust that has been built up in dialogue since the Second Vatican Council. This is precisely what is still at stake when the pope addresses the needs of Jews in his delayed reply, but there is no sign that he will really take up their concerns. Has he understood what the trauma of 10/7 means for Jews worldwide? The consequences are unmistakable: attacks against Jewish fellow citizens are once again the order of the day in European cities and beyond. It is not enough to condemn antisemitism in general, but [only] to add it to the global web of "divisions and hatred". It is not enough to condemn violence without unambiguously identifying the responsible actors. It does not help to invoke the "path of friendship, solidarity and cooperation" while the Jewish partner has to fight for his survival in his own country and on its borders.

### **Why is Cardinal Koch also silent?**

The Pope's letter is dated the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. Coincidence? In the liturgical calendar of the Church, the cycle of Christmas ends. But the pope continues as before. He is not alone in this. Since October 7, 2023, Cardinal Kurt Koch, the one in charge in the Vatican for religious relations with Judaism, has remained silent. In contrast to Patriarch Kirill, whom Koch has condemned in the strongest possible terms because of his legitimization of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the cardinal refrains from making a statement even four months after Hamas' attack on Israel. Maybe because he thought it was a matter for his supervisor? In view of the papal letter now available, one is almost tempted to understand the cardinal's silence.

### **Gregor Maria Hoff**

Gregor Maria Hoff, born in 1964, is professor of fundamental theology and ecumenical theology at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the Paris-Lodron University Salzburg and advisor to the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.