



Pope Francis presides over a Mass for the religious orders in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Feb. 2, 2024. (AP/Andrew Medichini, File)

by Associated Press

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Pope Francis on Feb. 3 reaffirmed Christians' special relationship with Jews amid rising antisemitism since the outbreak of the Gaza war in a letter to the Jews of Israel that he said was prompted by messages from Jewish organizations around the world.

The letter served as a belated fence-mending after Francis was criticized for his initial response to the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks on Israel. Francis said the Holy Land has been "cast into a spiral of unprecedented violence," part of what the pope referred to as "a sort of 'piecemeal world war,' with serious consequences on the lives of many populations."

"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," the pontiff wrote. "The whole world looks on at what is happening in that land with apprehension and pain."

In November, the pope set off a firestorm by using the word "terrorism" generically after meeting separately with relatives of Israeli hostages in Gaza and Palestinians living through the war.

Jewish leaders criticized his failure to explicitly condemn Hamas' attack, and bristled after the Palestinian visitors reported he had used the term "genocide" to describe Israel's actions in Gaza. The Vatican denied he had used the term in the private meeting, but since then Francis has been more balanced in his remarks and has explicitly condemned the Oct. 7 attack.

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Without elaborating, Francis said in the letter to Israeli Jews that he was moved by communication from friends and Jewish organizations around the world to "assure you of my closeness and affection. I embrace each of you and especially those who are consumed by anguish, pain, fear and even anger."

He said that Catholics "are very concerned about the terrible increase in attacks against Jews around the world we had hoped that 'never again' would be a refrain heard by the new generations, yet now we see that the path ahead requires ever closer collaboration to eradicate these phenomena."

"My heart is close to you, to the Holy Land, to all the peoples who inhabit it, Israelis and Palestinians, and I pray that the desire for peace may prevail in all," he said.

The reconciliation between Jews and Catholics provides "a horizon" to imagine a future "where light replaces darkness, in which friendship replaces hatred, in which cooperation replaces war."

"Together, Jews and Catholics, we must 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 wrote.