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Pilgrims walk near the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site, in the Old City of Jerusalem in this March 28, 2014, file photo. (CNS/Debbie Hill)



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Pope Leo XIV begins his tenure facing a nearly impenetrable thicket of global tensions, none more fraught with dangerous implications for Catholics and Jews than Israel's ongoing destruction of Gaza.

The world wants to know where the new pope stands on everything, whether that's the Russian invasion of Ukraine; civil strife in places like Ethiopia, Myanmar and Syria; the rise of authoritarianism globally; worldwide assaults on democratic institutions; or the demonizing of unprecedented waves of immigrants seeking safety from oppressive regimes and dire poverty.

One might excuse him for taking some time to sort things out. Instead, Leo stepped into the fray almost immediately, in two instances highlighting that most difficult tangle for Catholics — our relationship with Judaism and the church's response to the ongoing Israeli military campaign in Gaza.

"The theological dialogue between Christians and Jews remains ever important and close to my heart," the pope said May 20. "Even in these difficult times, marked by conflicts and misunderstandings, it is necessary to continue the momentum of this precious dialogue of ours."

The following day, his [first Wednesday general audience](#) in St. Peter's Square, he raised the issue of the [violence in Gaza](#).

"The situation in the Gaza Strip is increasingly worrying and painful," Leo said. "I renew my heartfelt appeal to allow the entry of dignified humanitarian aid and to put an end to the hostilities, the heart-rending price of which is being paid by children, the elderly and the sick."

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Israel's relentless campaign in Gaza has created tensions that threaten to erode the relationship between Catholics and Jews that has evolved since the promulgation in 1965 of the [Second Vatican Council document \*Nostra Aetate\*](#), which revolutionized the church's relationship with non-Christian religions.

*Nostra Aetate* held particular significance for Jews, given the church's long and violent antisemitic history. Acknowledging Christianity's roots in Judaism, the council declared: "Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding

and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues."

It is reasonable to infer that Leo is creating a space — establishing a distinction — between the need to pursue theological dialogue and assessing the exigencies in any given moment of Israeli politics and military pursuits.

The distinction is essential to the integrity of dialogue on both sides, even though it is exceedingly difficult to maintain, given that the extremes on both sides excel at monopolizing the attention economy around these issues.

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Those who romanticize the Palestinian cause or diminish the heinous violence of Hamas while engaging in antisemitic tropes in the name of justice obliterate history, ignore the anti-Israeli hostility throughout the region, and do violence to the very idea of justice.

Likewise, those who continue to attempt to justify the ongoing assault in Gaza by leveling the charge of antisemitism at any critique of the violence taking the lives of innocents diminish their own credibility. They drain the term antisemitism of its significance and the weight of history it should convey.

A recent piece in *The Jerusalem Post* by Ilon Mor, a retired Israeli diplomat, laid blame for an increase in tensions at the feet of Pope Francis. While heralding progress in the relationship since *Nostra Aetate*, the writer noted, "Yet, the path to mutual understanding has not been smooth. Tensions have persisted, notably during the pontificate of Pope Francis, whose public criticism of Israel's actions during the 2023 Gaza conflict was widely perceived in Jerusalem and among Jewish communities as unbalanced and insensitive."

The writer saw a counterpoint in a letter Leo wrote on May 8, just days after his election, to [Rabbi Noam Marans](#), director of Interreligious Affairs at the American Jewish Committee. In the letter, Leo assured of his "commitment to continue and strengthen the Church's dialogue and cooperation with the Jewish people in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council's 1965 declaration *Nostra Aetate*."



Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Pope Francis embrace after visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem May 26, 2014. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Mor's assessment of Francis, however, ignores the late pope's reputation as a friend of Judaism and Israel and suggests that we must always agree with the politics and military ambitions of "our elder brothers in the faith of Abraham," to use St. Pope John Paul II's description.

Regardless of how Leo is perceived at the moment, and however inextricably linked the secular state of Israel is to Judaism, it is unlikely the tensions will evaporate anytime soon. Leo, just as Francis, certainly will not ignore the pleas of Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, ecumenical patriarch of Jerusalem, who [described the situation in Gaza as "inconceivable."](#)

"We can't understand this and we can't accept this. We call on all people to resolve this conflict in a different way," he said. "Starvation is not solving the situation, it is only making it worse. This is not acceptable. It is no way to resolve a conflict, it is only creating hate."

Nor will Leo be able to ignore, as his predecessor could not, Catholics in Gaza. Francis made a [nightly call to Fr. Gabriel Romanelli](#), pastor of Holy Family Parish and heard firsthand of death and starvation and what the tiny parish was doing to assist those most in need.



A Palestinian child displaced by the Israeli military offensive lies inside the tent he took shelter in with his family May 25, 2025, in Gaza City, Gaza Strip. (OSV News/Reuters)

More than 53,000 people have died as a result of the Israeli attacks. An inordinate number of those killed were noncombatants. The greatest burden, as Leo noted, falls on "children, the elderly and the sick."

UNICEF now estimates that some 17,000 children in the Gaza strip have been separated from their parents.

It is significant to also note that Israelis are hardly united behind Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's continuation of the war and blockade of humanitarian aid. The reasons for the resistance and civil disobedience are varied, but hundreds of thousands have shown up in Israel's major population centers and outside Netanyahu's personal residence to protest.

Whatever Israel gains, whatever Netanyahu deems necessary to save his political future, the humanitarian disaster, beyond debate, is incomprehensible. It is, as the ecumenical patriarch said, "only creating hate."

The relationship between Catholics and Jews is not a simple matter. The dialogue and relationship spawned by *Nostra Aetate*, an acknowledgement of the wrong done to Jews by centuries of Catholic animosity and hate, is more important than ever. But that dialogue would be meaningless if, in pursuit of tranquility, it became the reason the church turned a blind eye to the massive suffering and human tragedy we're witnessing today in Gaza.

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