

The Holy See's commitment to Palestine

(29 July 2025)

With the conciliar Declaration “Nostra Aetate” of October 28, 1965, the Catholic Church embarked on a profound reevaluation of its relationship with other faiths. Faced with an increasingly globalized and interconnected society, the Council Fathers emphasized the importance of promoting unity and fraternity among peoples, all sharing a common origin in God, a shared destiny, and existential questions that transcend every era and culture.

The Declaration, in particular, opened the way for dialogue, collaboration, and mutual respect toward Muslims and Jews, explicitly recognizing their profound common roots. No discrimination or persecution, therefore, could be justified in the name of religion. On the contrary, religions - and in particular the Catholic Church - have the duty to work for reconciliation and peace among all peoples.

Sixty years later, the call contained in the Declaration echoes in the interreligious dialogue led by Pope Francis, following the path of his predecessors. This effort culminated, concerning relations with Islam, in the 2019 agreements of Abu Dhabi – “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together”¹, signed with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Mosque Ahmad Al-Tayyeb - and Rabat – “Declaration on Jerusalem as the City of Three Monotheistic Religions”², signed by His Holiness Pope Francis and King Mohammed VI of Morocco, “Commander of the Faithful and Protector of Believers of Other Religions.”

During his return journey from Rabat, Pope Francis expressed satisfaction with the results of his meetings in the United Arab Emirates and Morocco. He spoke of peace, unity, and fraternity as central values, highlighting concrete acts of interreligious dialogue, such as the signing of the Abu Dhabi Document and the joint appeal on Jerusalem.

He described these events as “promising flowers”³, which, although not yet fruits, trace a positive path. He warned against religious extremism present in all faiths, which rejects dialogue and fuels fear. Instead, he urged sowing hope and building bridges, not walls, noting that “those who build walls eventually become prisoners of them.” He reiterated that dialogue must not be abstract or theoretical (“laboratory-based”) but human -lived with mind, heart, and hands. He praised the openness and

¹ The Declaration is available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.

² The Declaration is available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2019/march/documents/papa-francesco_20190330_appello-marocco.html.

³ See https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2019/march/documents/papa-francesco_20190331_marocco-voloritorno.html.

willingness to dialogue shown by Moroccan religious leaders, encouraging continuation on this path of fraternity⁴.

Pope Francis' pontificate has not only sought to strengthen relations with the Muslim religious world but has also focused on the Middle East, cradle of the three monotheistic religions - and in particular on Palestine, seen as a land to be protected and safeguarded regardless of the faith of its inhabitants.

During his pilgrimage to the Holy Land - marking the 50th anniversary of the historic meeting in Jerusalem between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras - Pope Francis delivered a speech during his meeting with Palestinian authorities in Bethlehem on May 25, 2014⁵. He expressed gratitude for the warm welcome and recalled being in the holy place of Jesus' birth, the Prince of Peace. He condemned the grave suffering caused by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and stressed the urgent need to end an increasingly unacceptable situation. He urged all parties to redouble efforts to build stable peace based on justice, mutual recognition, and shared security, supporting the right of both States to exist within internationally recognized borders.

He emphasized the importance of avoiding actions that contradict the will for peace, calling for reconciliation even at the cost of some sacrifice. Only thus, he argued, can other problems be addressed and balanced development promoted in the region.

The Pope also praised the contribution of the Palestinian Christian community, which shares in the life of the people and participates in the common good, underscoring the value of religious freedom as the foundation for peaceful coexistence among different cultures and religions.

Finally, he commended President Abbas for his commitment to peace and expressed hope that the good relations between the Holy See and the State of Palestine would further strengthen (as later happened with the recognition of the State of Palestine). He concluded by invoking God's blessing and praying that "swords be turned into ploughshares"⁶ so that the Holy Land might bloom again in peace.

On June 26, 2015, Pope Francis, by signing the Comprehensive Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Palestine, officially recognized the State of Palestine. The Agreement's Preamble - effective January 2, 2016 - explicitly recognizes the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and calls for a solution based on coexistence of two states, centered on Jerusalem not only as a symbol but also as a sacred place for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, with universal cultural and religious significance.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ The speech is available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140525_terra-santa-autorita-palestinesi.html

⁶ *Ibidem*.

The Agreement recognizes the value of pluralism and peaceful coexistence among different faiths, starting with the Catholic presence in Palestine. Religions, indeed, can transform the Holy Places from monuments of the past into active spaces of spirituality, service to humanity, and building the common good; they are not mere “stones,” but living symbols of identity, cohesion, and community governance.

This vision underlies the Agreement’s provisions, starting from Chapter III, which recognizes the Catholic Church’s legal personality and right to self-organization. It safeguards its internal autonomy, freedom of ecclesiastical appointments, and exemption of clergy from personal obligations, including military service. The Palestinian legal system also recognizes ecclesiastical courts’ jurisdiction in certain matters. As specified in Chapter IV, these matters include essential aspects of personal life such as marriage, filiation, and adoption, in accordance with the personal status of Christians in the Holy Land. Chapter V addresses Holy Places, defining their legal regime, nature, and type. It affirms that the concept of sanctity, from which religious rights derive, constitutes a binding obligation for civil authorities, who must respect the Catholic Church’s canonical authority and jurisdiction over these sites, except for coordinated interventions. This is closely linked to the principle of religious autonomy and freedom, from which arises the need to ensure adequate protection for pilgrimages.

Chapter VI recognizes the Church’s right to operate in education, social services, welfare, and communication, regulating its relations with the state. Freedom to receive funds is guaranteed, as is managerial autonomy over its institutions and personnel selection.

Chapter VII focuses entirely on ecclesiastical properties and the applicable tax regime. Here, a functionality-based non-taxability principle is envisaged, subject to further negotiations and agreements to harmonize with local laws and conditions.

Ultimately, the Agreement aims to contribute to building stable and just peace, which, according to the signatories, can only be achieved through direct understanding between Israeli and Palestinian authorities. The Holy See reiterates its willingness to support dialogue and peace in the Holy Land through its educational, spiritual, and moral mission, remaining outside political or territorial disputes unless explicitly invited to mediate by both parties or by international bodies. This principle, stated in Article 2, paragraph 2 of the Agreement, builds upon and expands the formula of Article 24 of the Lateran Treaty⁷.

Since the start of the Gaza conflict on October 7, 2023, His Holiness Pope Francis has repeatedly expressed his deep concern over events on the ground, calling attention to humanitarian issues and

⁷ See VINCENZO BUONOMO, *Un Accordo per contribuire alla pace*, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 26 giugno 2015, available at online website <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2015/06/26/0511/01117.html>

human rights, even questioning publicly -before his passing -whether Israel's actions could be considered "an ongoing genocide"⁸.

Following Pope Francis' example, Pope Leo XIV has also repeatedly called for an end to hostilities in war-torn Gaza - a small strip of land and now a battlefield between Hamas, which controls the territory de facto, and Israel, which continues its occupation of lands described in the Sacred Texts⁹ as belonging to the descendants of Isaac¹⁰, even against UN resolution¹¹.

The Holy See's concern over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict further intensified after a recent Israeli missile attack on Gaza's Holy Family Church, which caused casualties and injuries. In the most recent Angelus of July 20, 2025¹², Pope Leo XIV remembered the victims by naming them individually, giving them an identity instead of leaving them as mere numbers among the thousands of casualties of this brutal war. In the conflict, religion itself is manipulated, despite the common values of the Abrahamic faiths -found in the Torah, Gospel, and Quran - of mercy, justice, and love for one's neighbor.

It is therefore hoped that "men of good will" may exert pressure on political leaders to end a conflict that, contrary to the values of fraternity and justice preached by religions, only leads to destruction and uprooting of the Palestinian people from their land.

Marco Spina

⁸ See <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/papa/news/2024-11/papa-francesco-indagare-se-a-gaza-e-genocidio-la-stampa-reyes.html>.

⁹ See <https://www.avvenire.it/rubriche/pagine/israele-guerra-e-vendetta-biblica-attenzione-a-non-appiccare-incendi>

¹⁰ Holy Bible, Genesis 17.

¹¹ See <https://www.amnesty.it/assemblea-generale-onu-israele-deve-cessare-occupazione-illegale-del-territorio-palestinese/>.

¹² The *Angelus* dated 20 July 2025 is available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/it/angelus/2025/documents/20250720-angelus.html>.