

Pope Francis and the Palestinians

All reports are clear that Pope Francis on meeting Mahmoud Abbas, now in the 10th year of his four-year term as President of the Palestinian Authority, in the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican on May 17, 2015 gave Abbas a bronze medallion, a gift that the Pope gives all foreign leaders to encourage their commitment to peace. It was explained that the medallion was a symbol represents the angel of peace destroying the bad spirit of war.

However, it is not clear whether the Pope addressed the Palestinian leader as “an angel of peace.” It is unlikely that he used these direct and controversial words. Even the most fervent abettor of Abbas realizes he may not be an angel. Most probably, Pope Francis, whatever the precise language he used when meeting Abbas, was trying to persuade the Palestinian to pursue the path of peace, as an angel would do.

No one can doubt the good intentions of Pope Francis or his keen desire to contribute to peace between Israel and its neighbors. The Pope already has made his own foray into Middle East diplomacy as a bridge builder for a peaceful resolution between the parties. In June 2014 he hosted a prayer meeting at the Vatican between the Israeli President, Shimon Peres, and President Abbas. The Pope told the two leaders that this was “a great sign of brotherhood which you offer as children of Abraham.” In his meeting in the Vatican on May 14, 2015 with a delegation from the Conference of European Rabbis, Pope Francis stressed that all Christians must be firm in deploring all forms of antisemitism and in showing solidarity with the Jewish people.

However, on May 13, 2015 the Vatican announced an agreement about the functioning of the Catholic Church in areas under

the control of the Palestinians. At that time, using controversial language, he referred to his interlocutors as "the State of Palestine." This can be seen as the first formal recognition of a Palestinian state in an official Vatican treaty.

Four days later the Pope canonized, and made saints of two 19 th century nuns, incorrectly described by much of the mainstream media as Palestinians, for their activity in the Middle East. Both were born when the area was controlled by the Ottoman Empire. One was Maryam Bawardy, born in Galilee in the 1840s, founder of the Carmelite convent in Bethlehem. The second was Marie-Alphonsine Ghattas, born in Jerusalem also in the 1840s, founder of the Sisters of the Most Holy Rosary of Jerusalem, and the organizer of the first local Arab religious congregation in Jerusalem.

Two issues arise concerning the actions and words of Pope Francis: one is the main, if not the real, problem in obtaining peace between Israel and Palestinians. The second is the relationship between the Catholic Church and world Jewry.

In the discussions between the Pope and Abbas, there appears to be no mention, let alone criticism, of the activities of the Palestinian Hamas movement. It is disturbing that Hamas is eagerly preparing its assets for continuing hostility against Israel. Hopes that Hamas would be disarmed after it had provoked the conflict in the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2014 have been frustrated.

On the contrary, as well as setting up camps that are mainly recreational in character, the armed wing of Hamas has organized a number of military camps in the Gaza Strip, for 17,000 youngsters between 15 and 21 who are trained in close-order-drills, throwing grenades, the basics of explosive devices, and in the firing of Kalashnikov rifles. "Pioneers of Liberation" camps exist for children at various educational levels; registration takes place in mosques in Gaza. The boys

are grouped in military battalions, wear paramilitary clothes, black shirts and green berets, and carry weapons.

These military camps have become a more important factor this year because the summer camps organized by the UNRWA were cancelled this year due to financial problems. Youngsters therefore go to the Hamas and Islamic Jihad camps. They are hosted and trained by members who wear khaki camouflage, of the terrorist Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades at Qassam bases.

It is unfortunate that the controversy over the exact words used by Pope Francis comes in the context of changes within the Catholic Church. Undoubtedly, the general if not complete attitude, starting with Pope John XXIII, (1958-1963), of the Catholic Church towards Jews has changed from one of mistrust, at best, to one of benign coexistence. The change is part of the Church's declared effort to fight against all forms of discrimination based on ethnic background or beliefs.

The passages on Jewish perfidy have been officially withdrawn from the Church Good Friday liturgy. The important declaration *Nostra Aetate* (In our Time), passed by the Vatican Council and promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, is a crucial step towards the repudiation of false charges against Jews. It proclaimed, "God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers." It rejects the indiscriminate charge of deicide by Jews of today. It decries all displays of antisemitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

Mahmoud Abbas may not be an angel, but he, as the Palestinian leader, should learn the lesson from *Nostra Aetate* and denounce those expressions and acts by Palestinians and their associates that lead or are intended to lead to violence or acts of terror against Jews, whether inside or outside the State of Israel. He should denounce the assertion, in essence a new form of deicide charge, made by some Palestinian spokespersons that Palestinians are suffering in similar

fashion to Jesus. He should flourish the bronze medallion he got from Pope Francis and join the commitment to peace.

First published in the