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Vatican
Pope Francis touches the death wall at the Auschwitz Nazi death camp in Oswiecim, Poland, i

Pope Francis touches the death wall at the Auschwitz Nazi death camp in Oswiecim, Poland, in this July 29, 2016, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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August 27, 2021
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Israel's Chief Rabbinate has written a letter to Pope Francis conveying its “distress” at comments he made suggesting Jewish law, as written in the Torah, is obsolete.

The letter, first reported on by Reuters, was sent by Rabbi Rasson Arousi, chair of the Commission of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel for Dialogue with the Holy See. Arousi was referring to a homily Francis made during a general audience on Aug. 11.

In that homily, or sermon, the pope reflected on the Apostle Paul's views in the New Testament that the Torah does not give life.

Speaking of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, the pope said: "It does not offer the fulfillment of the promise because it is not capable of being able to fulfill it

... Those who seek life need to look to the promise and to its fulfillment in Christ."

That statement comes close to supersessionism, also called replacement theology—the belief that the Christian faith has replaced or supplanted Judaism, a view the Catholic Church repudiated. In a 1965 landmark Vatican declaration, Nostra Aetate, the church established a new rapport between Jews and Catholics.

"In his homily, the pope presents the Christian faith as not just superseding the Torah; but asserts that the latter no longer gives life, implying that Jewish religious practice in the present era is rendered obsolete," Arousi wrote in the letter.

"This is in effect part and parcel of the 'teaching of contempt' towards Jews and Judaism that we had thought had been fully repudiated by the Church," he wrote.

Arousi's letter was sent to Cardinal Kurt Koch, whose Vatican department includes a commission for religious relations with Jews.

Massimo Faggioli, a Villanova University professor of theology and religious studies who studies the Vatican, said there may have been a lack of care in checking the texts of of the pope's homilies.

"I'm sure it's not that Pope Francis is going back to pre-Vatican II theology," Faggioli said, referring the council that met between 1962-1965 to usher in church reforms — such as its relationship with Judaism.

"But it's important because in this environment any minor signal that could suggest that the teaching of Vatican II should not be taken seriously is alarming."

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Since Nostra Aetate, the church has taken several steps to improve Jewish-Catholic relations. In 1998 the Vatican apologized for its inaction during the Holocaust. In 2015, the Vatican released a document that for the first time explicitly advises Catholics not to attempt to convert Jews.

Francis, in particular, has enjoyed a close friendship with Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka. The pair co-hosted a television show when he was archbishop of Buenos Aires. They also wrote a book together about interfaith dialogue.

Arousi asked to “convey our distress to Pope Francis” and requested the pope act to “ensure that any derogatory conclusions drawn from this homily are clearly repudiated.”

Faggioli said he expected that either Cardinal Koch or the pope himself would respond to the letter.