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Rubble surrounds the remains of burned out concrete buildings which are seen from an aerial

Buildings destroyed by Israeli airstrikes are seen in Gaza City Oct. 10, 2023. Israel launched the airstrikes in retaliation for the assault on the country by Hamas. (OSV News photo/Mohammed Salem, Reuters)

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October 16, 2023

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Catholic colleges and universities throughout the U.S. have condemned a devastating attack on Israel, while calling for prayers for peace.

Peter Kilpatrick, president of The Catholic University of America in Washington, said in an Oct. 12 statement that the university "continues to pray" for victims and "for all those impacted by the violence, for an end to hostilities, and for a lasting peace."

"Hamas is a terrorist organization and seeks the annihilation of the state of Israel. Its abhorrent acts of terrorism against Israel merit the strongest condemnation," said Kilpatrick. "There is no justification for the acts of violence against innocent civilians that we witnessed this week."

Referencing remarks made by Pope Francis in an Oct. 11 general audience, Kilpatrick said that "as the Holy Father noted … Israel has a right to self defense."

"The Holy Father has also rightly added an expression of concern for the 'total siege under which the Palestinians are living in Gaza, where there have also been many innocent victims,'" said Kilpatrick.

He said "the war in the Middle East has its roots in a history that is as long as it is complex," and quoted Francis' Oct. 11 warning that "terrorism and extremism do not help," and that the current war, according to the pope, will "fuel hatred, violence, revenge, and only cause each other to suffer. The Middle East does not need war, but peace, a peace built on dialogue and the courage of fraternity."

"Shamefully, on some college campuses there have been acts of anti-Semitism or hateful comments made against Muslim students," said Kilpatrick. "There is no room on a Catholic campus for words and actions that do not uphold the respect and dignity due to every single member of this community. My hope for Catholic University is that we join together to support the cause of peace."

That intention will be "mentioned particularly at all of our Sunday Masses on campus," said Kilpatrick, who also pointed to a call from the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, asking all religious communities to observe Oct. 17 as a day of fasting, abstinence and prayer for peace in the Middle East.

On Oct. 7, Hamas militants stormed from the Gaza Strip into approximately 22 locations in Israel, gunning down civilians and taking more than 150 hostages, including infants, the elderly and people with disabilities.

The coordinated attack took place on a Sabbath that marked the final day of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, which celebrates the gathering of the harvest and the divine protection of the ancient Israelites as they escaped from slavery in Egypt.

Israel declared war on Hamas Oct. 8, placing Gaza under siege and pounding the region with airstrikes. Hamas has continued to launch strikes against Israel. To date, more than 1,400 in Israel, including at least 30 U.S. citizens, and at least 2,778 in Gaza have been killed. Israel placed Gaza under siege, and has warned some 1.1 million in Gaza to move south within the enclave ahead of an expected ground offensive by Israeli forces.

Fordham University president Tania Tetlow called for the school's community to "come together to pray hard for peace."

In an Oct. 10 statement, Tetlow said that "many members" of the university's community "are in unimaginable pain, terrified for loved ones in both Israel and Gaza, or mourning friends and family already lost to the horrific attacks and now to the war.

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She said that "for many of our Jewish students, colleagues, and alumni, this is yet another brutal reminder of their vulnerability, of rising antisemitism in the U.S. and around the world -- an attack not just on a nation but on their identity."

In addition, "many of our Muslim students, colleagues, and alumni also face the fear of collective blame and reprisals, worried about violence and discrimination," said Tetlow.

The New York university hosted two outdoor interfaith prayer services Oct. 11 and 13 at its Lincoln Center and Rose Hill campuses, respectively.

La Salle University president Daniel J. Allen announced an Oct. 18 interfaith prayer service, following the return of students from the school's fall break.

"We condemn the acts of terror and violence against innocent civilians by Hamas," said Allen in an Oct. 12 statement. "We are reminded of our Lasallian values and the expectations we hold as Lasallians that our community members will demonstrate respect for all persons and will not engage in or promote violence and hatred in any form.

"With that shared interest in our minds and our hearts, we will gather to pray for peace … to come together as one and pray as sisters and brothers for our common good," Allen said. "We gather to pray for an end to violence and hatred; and for a peace that is just, fair, and equitable for all people."

In an Oct. 9 statement, Allen had noted that members of Philadelphia's La Salle community "have been personally impacted and have lost loved ones in this conflict," although "thankfully … our colleagues at Bethlehem University are safe."

Bethlehem University is a fellow Lasallian university in the West Bank.

Georgian Court University, founded by the Sisters of Mercy, said in Oct. 10 statement that its community was "heartbroken by this devastating terrorist attack and the resonating impact it may have on our neighbors" in Lakewood, New Jersey, home to "a thriving Jewish community."

Like many of its fellow Catholic universities and colleges, the school also urged faculty, staff and students to avail themselves of campus mental health resources.

"One of the Sisters of Mercy's critical concerns, nonviolence, emphasizes the importance of working for peace through prayer, education, and personal and communal practices of nonviolence and advocacy," said the Georgian Court University statement. "We are committed to ensuring this concern is incorporated into everything we do in the weeks and months to come."

It continued: "The pain and suffering that so many are feeling today will not go away overnight. As a community, we will continue to pray for all victims of violence and their families, and offer hope for safety and peace throughout this region."

Jonathan Peri, president of Manor College in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania -- a school founded by the Ukrainian Catholic Sisters of St. Basil, and a particular locus of support for Ukraine since Russia first launched attacks on that nation in 2014 -- condemned Hamas' attack on Israel in an online message posted Oct. 10.

"War is a grave tactic that destroys innocent lives," said Peri. "We will keep making our difference in the world by praying for peace, sharing messages of peace, acting to thwart evil, and educating for peace."