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Pope Francis reads from a sheet of paper while standing in shadow in the window of his apart

Pope Francis speaks to the crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican to pray the Angelus with him Dec. 17, 2023. (CNS photo/Pablo Esparza)



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Pope Francis condemned the Israeli military's killing of two Christian women sheltering at a Catholic parish in Gaza and an attack on a convent, noting that in the current fighting "unarmed civilians are targets for bombs and gunfire."

After praying the Angelus with some 22,000 people in St. Peter's Square Dec. 17, the pope decried the Dec. 16 sniper attack on the compound of the Holy Family Catholic Parish in Gaza where, he said, "there are no terrorists, but families, children, people who are sick and have disabilities, sisters."

He also named the mother and daughter -- Nahida Khalil Anton and Samar Kamal Anton -- who were killed in the parish compound.

"One was killed as she tried to carry the other to safety. Seven more people were shot and wounded as they tried to protect others inside the church compound," said a statement by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which also specified that they were shot by a sniper of the Israeli military.

"No warning was given, no notification was provided. They were shot in cold blood inside the premises of the Parish, where there are no belligerents," it said.

The statement added that Israeli forces fired three rockets on a convent in the church compound belonging to the Missionaries of Charity, where 54 disabled persons lived, rendering the home uninhabitable.

"Some are saying, 'this is terrorism and war,' " Francis said after reciting the Angelus prayer Dec. 17. "Yes, it is war; it is terrorism."

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"Let us pray to the Lord for peace," he said, asking people to "not forget out brothers and sisters who are suffering because of war in Ukraine, in Palestine and Israel, and in other conflict zones."

"As Christmas approaches, may the dedication to open paths of peace be strengthened," he said.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, met Dec. 16 with Italy's delegate to the Arab League and the ambassadors of Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt to the Holy See. The cardinal reiterated Francis' repeated calls for a cease-fire between Israel and Palestine and the need for humanitarian access into Gaza. He also again repeated the Vatican's call for a two-state solution in the Holy Land and the creation of an internationally enforced statute for the city of Jerusalem, the Vatican said.

Before praying the Angelus, the pope reflected on the day's Gospel reading from St. John, which says that St. John the Baptist "came to testify the light" before the coming of Jesus.

Through his example, St. John the Baptist teaches Christians two things, Francis said: "First, that we cannot save ourselves alone, only in God do we find the light of life. And second, that each of us, through service, consistency, humility, witness of life -- and always by God's grace -- can be a lamp that shines and helps others find the war on which to meet Jesus."

He encouraged Christians to ask themselves, "How can I, in the places I live, not in the distant future but now, this Christmas, testify to light, testify to Christ?"

A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 5-18, 2024** print issue under the headline: Pope condemns targeting of unarmed civilians in Gaza.