Vatican
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Pope Francis touches a gray wall while bowing his head. He stands in an outdoor space.

Pope Francis touches the death wall at the Auschwitz Nazi death camp in Oswiecim, Poland, in this July 29, 2016, file photo. During his weekly general audience Jan. 24, 2024, Francis highlighted International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust. Jan. 27 and the importance of remembering and condemning the horrible extermination of millions of Jews and people of other faiths. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

by Associated Press

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Pope Francis recalled the extermination of millions of Jews in calling Jan. 24 for the upcoming Holocaust Day of Remembrance to reaffirm that war can never be justified and only benefits weapons makers.

At the end of his weekly general audience, Francis referred to Saturday's commemoration, which has become fraught this year given Israel's military campaign in Gaza and a rise in antisemitism in Europe and around the world.

"The remembrance and condemnation of that horrific extermination of millions of Jews and of other faiths, which occurred in the first half of the last century, help us all not to forget that the logic of hatred and violence can never be justified, because they deny our very humanity," Francis said.

Italy's Jewish community has denounced a rise in antisemitic sentiment, including what leaders call the improper use of terms like "genocide," following the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks in southern Israel and Israel's military response in Gaza.

On Jan. 23, the head of the Jewish community Naomi Di Segni announced that marathons around Italy that have traditionally marked past Holocaust Remembrance Days had been cancelled this year because of security concerns.

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She also complained about unnamed Catholic leaders who had "minimized the recognition of what happened on Oct. 7 as a terrorist act compared to the right of Israel to defend itself." She didn't name names, but some Jewish leaders have complained about Francis' initial comments, in which he didn't identify Hamas by name and complained generally that "we've gone beyond war … this is terrorism."

Francis has subsequently always referred to suffering in both Israel and Gaza, and specifically condemned the Oct. 7 attack.

Francis said this year's commemoration falls amid not only the war in Gaza but also in "tormented Ukraine" and called for prayers for the victims and for political leaders to "cherish human life by putting an end to wars."

"Let us not forget: War is always a defeat, always," he said. "The only 'winner' is the arms manufacturers."