Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis prays in front of a Nativity scene crafted in the West Bank city of Bethlehem, as he arrives for a meeting with the donors of the fir tree set up in St. Peter's Square as a Christmas tree and those who have crafted the life-size Nativity scene at the tree's feet, in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, Saturday, Dec. 7, 2024. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

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After receiving backlash from Jewish groups, the Vatican chose to not put the keffiyeh back in its original place on the manger of the Palestinian-made Nativity scene in the Paul VI Hall.

The Nativity scene was crafted by artists from Bethlehem using local materials and was inaugurated by Pope Francis before Palestinian political representatives on Dec. 7. One artist who collaborated on creating the Nativity, Faten Nastas Mitwasi, told RNS that Palestinian officials had placed the keffiyeh, a black and white checkered scarf that has come to symbolize the Palestinian cause, on the manger of the Nativity shortly before the arrival of the pope.

She added that while it was not their initial intention to turn the Nativity into a political statement, they welcomed the final addition of the keffiyeh as a symbol of national identity.

After the keffiyeh was removed by Vatican officials along with the baby Jesus, papal spokesperson Matteo Bruni told RNS it's customary for the statue of Jesus to be removed from the Nativity scene until Christmas Day. But on Saturday (Jan. 4), when the Paul VI Hall was finally visible to the public, the statue of Jesus lay on a bundle of hay, and the keffiyeh was still missing.

Neither the artists nor the Vatican responded to a request for comment on the missing keffiyeh ahead of publication.

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In the days after the keffiyeh first appeared, the American Jewish committee had said its members were "disappointed and troubled" by the keffiyeh being displayed in the Vatican's Nativity scene, a feeling echoed by other Jewish groups in Italy. The chief rabbi in Genoa, Italy, Giuseppe Momigliano, told local media outlets that "the dialogue with the Italian Bishops' Conference remains open, but the pope's behavior surely doesn't help. Regardless of whether it's explicit or symbolic."

The conflict in the Middle East has negatively impacted the relationship between the Vatican and the Jewish community as Pope Francis attempts to take an impartial stance between Israel and Palestine. The pope's recent remarks to Catholic cardinals on Dec. 21, when he described Israeli attacks that killed 25 Palestinians, including children, as "cruelty," were criticized in a Dec. 31 letter by leaders of the U.S.' largest Jewish organization.

"With global antisemitism at record highs, the American Jewish community calls on you to refrain from making incendiary comments and to build bridges between our two peoples," read the letter by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.