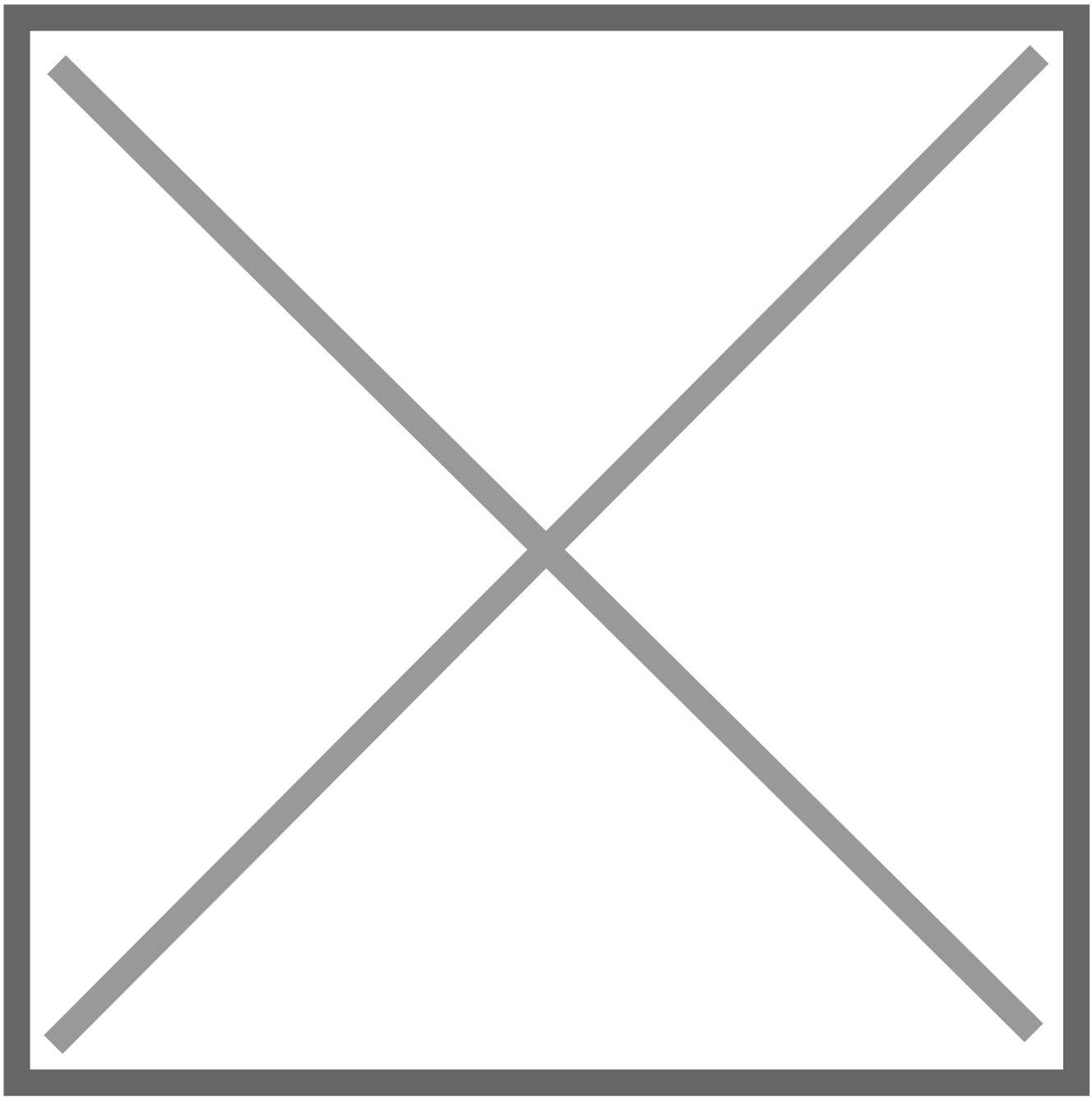
News



An Israeli soldier is seen destroying a statue of Jesus in Debel, Lebanon, April 19, 2026. The Israel Defense Force on April 19 confirmed the authenticity of the photo, which was posted on X by Palestinian journalist Younis Tirawi. (OSV News/x.com via Reuters)

Junno Arocho Esteves

View Author Profile



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Jerusalem — April 21, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Catholic leaders in the Holy Land expressed their "unreserved condemnation" after a picture of an Israeli soldier striking the head of a statue of Jesus in Debel, a Christian village in southern Lebanon, went viral on social media.

In a statement signed by Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, issued April 20, the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land expressed its "profound indignation and unreserved condemnation of the desecration of a representation of Jesus Crucified by an Israeli soldier in a Lebanese village."

"This act constitutes a grave affront to the Christian faith and adds to other reported incidents of desecration of Christian symbols by IDF soldiers in southern Lebanon." It also reveals "a disturbing failure in moral and human formation, wherein even the most elementary reverence for the sacred and for the dignity of others has been gravely compromised."

Israeli authorities condemned the actions of an Israeli soldier who desecrated the statue of Jesus in a Lebanese village to which Israel denied humanitarian access for weeks.

The Israel Defense Force, or IDF, said it was investigating the destruction of a statue of Jesus after a photo published online showed an Israeli soldier desecrating the image in southern Lebanon.

In a statement published on April 19, the IDF said an initial examination confirmed the photo's authenticity, stating that it "views the incident with great severity and emphasizes that the soldier's conduct is wholly inconsistent with the values expected of its troops."

"The incident is being investigated by the Northern Command and is currently being addressed through the chain of command. Appropriate measures will be taken against those involved in accordance with the findings," the IDF said.

The photo, which was posted to X by Palestinian journalist Younis Tirawi, showed an Israeli soldier striking the head of a statue of Jesus crucified with a sledgehammer.

In a subsequent post, Tirawi identified the incident location as Debel, a village roughly 54 miles south of Beirut. A Facebook page from Debel shared by the journalist posted a picture of the statue before its destruction, along with the words: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

"The Assembly calls for immediate and decisive disciplinary action, a credible process of accountability, and clear assurances that such conduct will neither be tolerated nor repeated," the Catholic leaders of the Holy Land said in their April 20 statement.

Debel is a Christian village to which Pope Leo sent a message of closeness April 7, citing the "dramatic circumstances" the people of the village "are experiencing."

Signed by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state, and published in French, the message said the pope "extends his message of consolation and compassion to all Christians in South Lebanon and to all those suffering the consequences of the war."

"Today, we celebrate the resurrection of the Lord," Pope Leo said. "May you, amidst feelings of sorrow, anguish, and mourning, experience a deeper joy in your hearts today: Jesus has gloriously triumphed over death. It is a joy that comes from heaven and that nothing can take from you."

Advertisement

Catholic Near East Welfare Association-Pontifical Mission, or CNEWA, cares for 430 Maronite Catholic families in Debel, 425 Christian families in the village of Ain Ebel, and 1,400 Maronite Catholic families in Rmeich.

Aid convoys the agency tried to send both before and after Easter did not receive permission for safe passage and were scheduled to attempt passage in the week following Divine Mercy Sunday, April 12, and OSV News is awaiting confirmation on whether they were able to pass.

Reuters news agency confirmed that the cross smashed by an Israeli soldier was part of a small shrine in the garden of a family living on the edge of the village, said Fr. Fadi Falfel, a priest in Debel.

"One of the Israeli soldiers broke the cross and did this horrible thing, this desecration of our holy symbols," he told Reuters.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in an April 20 X post: "I condemn the act in the strongest terms."

"Israel cherishes and upholds the Jewish values of tolerance and mutual respect between Jews and worshippers of all faiths," the Israeli prime minister said, adding that "like the overwhelming majority of Israelis," he was "stunned and saddened to learn that an IDF soldier damaged a Catholic religious icon in southern Lebanon."

He said the IDF "will take appropriately harsh disciplinary action against the offender."

"We express regret for the incident and for any hurt this has caused to believers in Lebanon and around the world," Netanyahu said.

U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee took to X to say, "Swift, severe, & public consequences are needed" to address the incident.

While Netanyahu said on X that "the Christian population in Israel thrives unlike elsewhere in the Middle East" and that "Israel is the only place in the Middle East that adheres to freedom of worship for all," religious freedom organizations cite a long list of past acts against Christian symbols and attacks on Christians in Israel.

According to the Religious Freedom Data Center, a Jerusalem-based group that documents incidents affecting religious freedom, particularly against Christians, an estimated 181 incidents of "harassment targeting Christians, Christian symbols, and Christian institutions" were committed in Israel in 2025.

The group also reported an additional 44 incidents between January and March 2026.

The outrage online prompted an initial response from IDF spokesman Lt. Col. Nadav Shoshani, who said that the actions of the soldier "do not align with the IDF's values and the behavior expected of IDF soldiers" should the image be proven real.

Following the IDF's confirmation of the photo's authenticity, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar called the soldier's desecration "grave and disgraceful" and apologized "to every Christian whose feelings were hurt."

Commending the IDF for its investigation, Sa'ar said via X he was "confident that the necessary strict measures will be taken against whoever carried out this ugly act."

Antonio Tajani, Italy's foreign minister, welcomed Sa'ar's statement on "the serious act committed by an IDF soldier."

Tajani said the destruction of the statue was a "violent act of aggression against Christians, who in the Middle East represent an instrument of peace."

"It is an unacceptable episode that we hope will never be repeated," Tajani wrote on X. "Profaning the symbols of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam is not a demonstration of strength but only of weakness, contrary to all principles in favor of freedom and interreligious dialogue."

While there has been no official statement from the Catholic leaders in Lebanon, Wadie Abunassar, coordinator of the Holy Land Christian Forum, said in an interview with Israeli news website Ynet that the soldier's actions were "truly revolting."

"I prayed it wasn't real. The aggression in the image and what emerges from the footage is very severe and disturbing," he said. "When something that is in the depths of your soul is harmed, you cannot remain indifferent."

The Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land said in its statement that "even in the face of such offense, the Cross remains unassailable in its meaning ... a

source of dignity, hope, and redemption, and as a summons to overcome violence through sacrificial love."

The assembly renewed a call "to bring to an end the war that has tormented this region for far too long and to embrace a path where peace is witnessed in restraint, dialogue, responsibility, and reverence for the sacred and for every human life."

OSV News reached out for comment to Matteo Bruni, director of the Holy See Press Office, and is awaiting answer.

This story appears in the **War in Iran** feature series. View the full series.