News

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Outrage has grown as a photo surfaced of an Israeli soldier desecrating a statue of the Virgin Mary in Lebanon. Concerns are mounting about increasing anti-Christian behavior as Israel continues war in the Middle East.

In a photo shared online May 6, an IDF soldier can be seen holding a cigarette over the mouth of Mary. Responding to the photo, newly appointed IDF spokesman Lt. Col. Nadav Shoshani said the soldier's conduct "completely deviates from the values expected of its personnel."

"Following an initial review, the image in question was taken several weeks ago. The incident will be investigated, and command measures will be taken against the soldier in accordance with the findings," Shoshani said in an account that has since been taken over by a new IDF spokeswoman, Ariella Mazor.

According to The Times of Israel, the military's initial assessment of the photo was that it was taken several weeks ago in the Lebanese village of Debel, the same area where an Israeli soldier was photographed more than two weeks ago striking the head of a statue of Jesus with the blunt side of an axe.

The latest incident drew outrage, including a statement from Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which said that such "actions offend the religious sentiments of Christians."

Noting the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Poland's foreign ministry office said that "every state has a responsibility to respect this fundamental right," including Israel.

"In Poland, insulting religious feelings is a punishable offense. Repeated incidents involving representatives of the State of Israel that violate the religious sentiments of Christians undermine efforts to promote peace and cooperation in the Middle East," it said.

Speaking to the BBC, Father Fadi Felefli, who spoke to Pope Leo on a video call with other priests on May 6, said: "Honestly, this issue really provoked us, especially after the apology regarding the cross."

"It also shows that there are individuals within the (Israeli) army that lack ethics and values and are bigoted. This reflects a great deal of fanaticism," Felefli said, confirming that the Virgin Mary statue was still intact and not broken, but he called such actions "unethical," the BBC said.

OSV News reached out to both the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land for comment on the latest incident and is awaiting a response.

The desecration came a little over a week after the assault of a French nun in Jerusalem by an Israeli settler. The Times of Israel reported May 7 that Yona Schreiber, a 36-year-old man from the West Bank settlement of Peduel, was indicted and charged with assault "motivated by hostility toward a religious group."

The nun, who worked as a researcher at the French Biblical and Archaeological School of Jerusalem, was attacked April 28 near the Cenacle, the site of the Last Supper. A video posted on X showed Schreiber knocking the nun to the ground and kicking her.

A Maronite Catholic convent was reportedly "demolished," according to L'Osservatore Romano, in Yaroun, in southern Lebanon.

Father Ibrahim Faltas, vicar of the Custody of the Holy Land, wrote in Vatican News commenting on escalating violence toward Christians, places of worship and religious freedom in the region: "In whose name and for what motivation can sacred places be destroyed and outraged, human beings offended and humiliated, religious signs and symbols trampled upon?" he asked.

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