



A delegation of U.S. Christians hold an Aug. 18 prayer vigil at the Kerem Shalom crossing on the border between Israel and Gaza. The group came to the Middle East to accompany threatened Christians and other Palestinians and call for a cease-fire in Gaza. (OSV News/Paul Jeffrey)



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**Editor's note:** *This article is a version of the [original posting here](#).*

Pope Francis recently affirmed the [value and importance of interreligious dialogue](#) during his trip to Asia, inviting his listeners "to do everything possible to maintain a courageous attitude and promote an environment in which young people can enter into dialogue, because interreligious dialogue is something that creates a path. If you dialogue as young people, you will dialogue more as adults, as citizens, as politicians."

As a Roman Catholic committed to the practice of interreligious dialogue with Jews and Muslims in the United States, I share in Francis' hope that interreligious dialogue can create a path to a shared future with interreligious neighbors, and that developing the habits of dialogue early is important. But I particularly resonated with Francis' recognition that dialogue requires great courage.



Pope Francis and Indonesian President Joko Widodo meet on the veranda of Merdeka Palace, the official presidential residence Sept. 4 in Jakarta, Indonesia. Divine Word Fr. Markus Solo Kewuta, an Indonesian official at the Vatican Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, center, translates for the pope. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Interreligious dialogue is not an easy pursuit — particularly in times of war, conflict and deep divisions. Just showing up to dialogue can be a brave act. When I've told people about the [dialogues I've been a part of this past year](#) with Jews and Muslims, they have a lot of questions: *How are you actually able to do dialogue right now? Has the violence in Israel and Gaza frayed interreligious relationships beyond repair? What are commonly held objections and fears about interreligious dialogue, particularly around Israel and Gaza?*

Here are some common objections to interreligious dialogue that individuals must courageously grapple with before entering a conversation on Israel and Gaza, or any topic where participants are deeply divided:

### **Objection No. 1: Dialogue is not possible on this topic.**

For some who are convinced of the justice of their position on a given topic, engaging in dialogue is at best a waste of time, and at worst an act complicit with injustice. They are not interested in developing a mutual understanding of divergent viewpoints, but only in convincing others of the justice of their position. They want [to debate, not dialogue](#).

I understand and respect this position. There are certain topics and certain times when debate may be the right mode of engagement for both individuals and for organizations. But the choice to engage in interreligious dialogues aimed at keeping strained interreligious relationships — particularly Jewish and Muslim relationships — from breaking under the weight of the Israel-Hamas war, is a courageous choice that I hope is also respected.

### **Objection No. 2: Dialogue is not possible at this time.**

For some, the timing of a dialogue is not right for them. They have replied to interreligious dialogue invitations on Israel and Gaza in the past year by saying, "Not now. But maybe someday."

Most of these participants have had positive experience with interreligious dialogues in the past. Many are emotionally spent, and the capacity to take on more pain is too much for their heart and head to bear. I understand that dialogue requires significant mental, emotional and spiritual reserves. When such people have the courage to dialogue, they can rejoin the conversation.

### **Objection No. 3: I don't know enough to dialogue.**

Many people worry that their knowledge level is not adequate to enter into a dialogue on Israel and Gaza, and so will opt not to participate until they "know enough" to do so. I've taken to calling this objection (or hesitancy) "literacy anxiety." Those suffering from literacy anxiety are concerned that they aren't reading enough, or they are reading the wrong things. They don't feel equipped to present their own position to someone else — either because they might not have a fully defined position or they worry that they need to engage in a kind of "debate-prep" before entering into interreligious dialogue.

For those concerned that "literacy anxiety" inhibits their ability to dialogue, I have assured them that they are not alone in feeling inadequate to the task at hand.



Please be brave and join a dialogue; be willing to share what you do know about Israel and Gaza — it will add to the conversation.

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#### **Objection No. 4: My relationships will be adversely affected.**

Many people don't want to talk about Israel and Gaza for fear of personal and professional consequences. Some are concerned that family, neighbors and friends will think less of them if they share a position that their loved ones do not agree with — forever changing their interpersonal dynamic, and possibly irreparably harming a treasured bond. Some have expressed concern that their professional life might be harmed if they take a position on the war, or even enter into a dialogue, about this topic.

To these people, I say: Walking into dialogue requires courage. Recognizing both the real and perceived harms that may come with talking about Israel and Gaza, my organization has prioritized creating small, face-to-face dialogue encounters with people who know one another in order to mitigate these harms, and create the conditions for authentic conversations.

#### **Objection No. 5: This war is not religious/interreligious.**

While I don't claim that the situation in Israel and Gaza is exclusively (or even primarily) an interreligious matter, you can't avoid the religious/interreligious elements that are part of the conflict. This conflict is complex, but religion is part of this mix. There is an important contribution that interreligious dialogues can make in that peacebuilding work.

Francis is right — interreligious dialogue is a risky endeavor that requires great courage. We need courage to listen and to speak. Silence around this war advances neither justice, nor peace. Avoiding conversations with friends, colleagues or neighbors will not solve conflict, nor will it slow the spread of antisemitism and Islamophobia. We must be willing to say hard things — and importantly, to hear hard things — from neighbors, colleagues, family and friends. We must have courage to dialogue.