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Vatican's keffiyeh Nativity scene raises eyebrows and then disappears—at least until Christmas Eve

Nicole Winfield - Associated Press

December 11, 2024

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis presided over his weekly general audience Wednesday alongside a Palestinian-crafted Nativity scene that was missing its eyebrow-raising signature element: a keffiyeh-draped manger holding the infant Jesus.

The wooden Nativity scene in the Vatican's main audience hall had generated headlines when it was unveiled Dec. 7 because of the presence of the keffiyeh, the black-and-white checkered headscarf that has become a potent symbol of the Palestinian cause.

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Pope Francis had prayed before the creche briefly that day when he greeted the artists and donors responsible for all the Vatican's Christmas decorations this year, which include various depictions of the manger in a Bethlehem stable where Jesus is said to have been born.

This year, the Nativity scenes were made by Bethlehem-based artisans. Representatives of the Palestinian Embassy to the Holy See, as well as special representatives of Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, had been on hand at the Vatican that day for the unveiling.

By Wednesday, when Francis was seen again in the audience hall, the keffiyeh, manger and infant Jesus had been removed from the Nativity scene, while the figures of parents Mary and Joseph remained. While it is tradition in the Vatican for the infant Jesus to only be placed in the manger on Dec. 24, when Catholics celebrate the birth of Jesus, often the mangers remain in the scenes empty until that date.

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The Christ figure had apparently been placed in the manger on Dec. 7 to show off the finished product while the donors, artisans and pope were there to see it.

A Palestinian official said the Vatican had removed the keffiyeh without explanation, and it was unclear whether it would be restored on Dec. 24. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter with the media.

The official Palestinian news agency WAFA, in its report on the unveiling, noted the significance of the Jesus figure being wrapped in a keffiyeh.

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During the encounter with the Christmas donors, Francis again referred to the “martyred Palestine” and, noting the broader conflict, repeated his call for an end to war. The Holy Land, including Bethlehem, is home to a small Christian community.

“Let us remember the brothers and sisters who, instead, right there and in other parts of the world, are suffering from the tragedy of war,” he said. “With tears in our eyes, let us raise our prayer for peace. Brothers and sisters, enough war, enough violence!”

Francis has called for Hamas to release hostages taken from Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, but he has long been sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. He recently caused an uproar when he called for an investigation to determine if Israel’s attacks in Gaza constituted genocide.

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Two Palestinian children presented the pope with a “Bethlehem Star” award, which WAFA said was a “powerful reminder of the suffering and sorrow endured by Palestinian children amid the ongoing Israeli war and blockade in Gaza.”

The Israeli Embassy to the Holy See declined to comment on whether it had complained about the keffiyeh creche or asked for it to be removed. Vatican officials merely recalled Vatican tradition that calls for the infant Jesus to only appear in the manger on Christmas Eve.

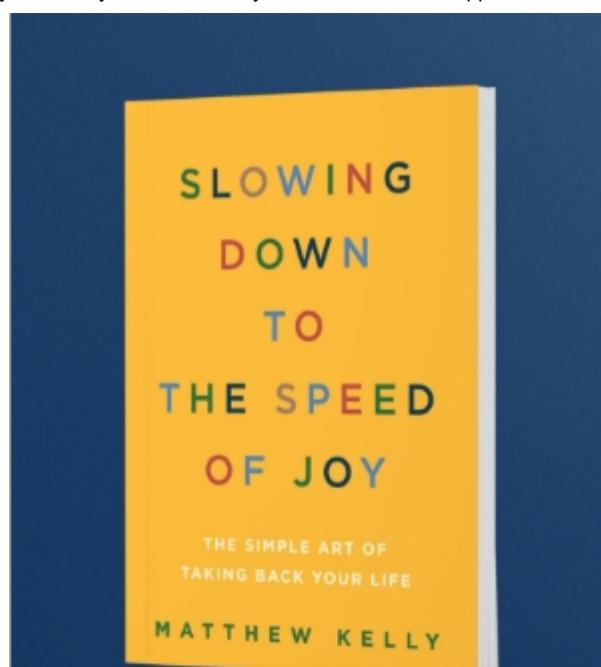
PLO executive committee member Ramzi Khoury who attended the unveiling, expressed deep gratitude for what he said was the pope’s unwavering support for the Palestinian cause and his tireless efforts to end the war on Gaza and promote justice, WAFA said.

Coincidentally, Francis on Thursday is due to meet Abbas, the Palestinian president, at the Vatican.



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