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Salesian Father Antonio Scudu, caretaker of St. Stephen Church in the Beit Jamal Salesian mo

Salesian Father Antonio Scudu, caretaker of St. Stephen Church in the Beit Jamal Salesian monastery near Jerusalem, holds a portion of a shattered statue of Mary Sept. 26, 2017, after vandals broke into the church. (CNS photo/Debbie Hill)

by Catholic News Service

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Jerusalem — December 15, 2021

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Christian leaders in the Holy Land have asked for "an urgent dialogue" with Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian leaders "to ensure that no citizen or institution has to live under threat of violence or intimidation."

They also want to discuss creation of a special Christian cultural and heritage zone in Jerusalem's Old City to preserve Christian sites.

"Since 2012, there have been countless incidents of physical and verbal assaults against priests and other clergy, attacks on Christian churches, with holy sites regularly vandalized and desecrated, and ongoing intimidation of local Christians who simply seek to worship freely and go about their daily lives," the leaders said Dec. 13. "These tactics are being used by such radical groups in a systematic attempt to drive the Christian community out of Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land."

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The patriarchs and heads of churches acknowledged the Israeli government was committed to preserving the Christian community "as an integral part of the tapestry of the local community."

"It is therefore a matter of grave concern when this national commitment is betrayed by the failure of local politicians, officials and law enforcement agencies to curb the activities of radical groups who regularly intimidate local Christians, assault priests and clergy, and desecrate Holy Sites and church properties," their statement said.

They noted that the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem's Old City already was protected in Israeli law, but "radical groups continue to acquire strategic property in the Christian Quarter, with the aim of diminishing the Christian presence, often using underhanded dealings and intimidation tactics to evict residents from their homes, dramatically decreasing the Christian presence, and further disrupting the historic pilgrim routes between Bethlehem and Jerusalem."