

Preemptive apologies

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [April 12, 2000](#) issue

Pope John Paul II has issued a mea culpa for 2,000 years of his church's history, a millennium wrap-up that apologizes for sins of omission like the Holocaust, before which the Catholic Church remained silent, and sins of commission like the Inquisition, the persecution of learning (Galileo) and the Crusades. But while we are apologizing for past misdeeds, isn't it time to offer preemptive apologies for our current sins of omission and commission?

A future pope will need to be told of the death of a mother who was killed by Israeli soldiers near the Palestinian city of Hebron a few hours before Pope John Paul arrived for his historic trip to Israel. Halima Al-Aloul—mother of 12, the youngest of whom is two—was killed by Israeli soldiers as she and her husband tried to drive away from an army checkpoint.

Phil Reeves, a reporter for the London-based newspaper the *Independent*, attended the funeral of Halima Al-Aloul in the village of Nuba. Mrs. Al-Aloul was traveling home with her husband to her village after visiting their daughter in Nuba. Earlier that evening three Israelis settlers had been shot while driving on a road between the villages of Kharas and Sourif. No one was killed, but the incident prompted the army to set up temporary roadblocks, one of which the Alouls encountered.

Al-Haq, a Palestinian legal group that monitors human rights in the area, reports that when Mrs. Al-Aloul's husband realized that he was traveling without his car insurance document, he turned around and attempted to drive away from the roadblock. At this point Israeli soldiers "fired at least 20 rounds at the car, without any warning to stop." Mrs. Al-Aloul was hit six times in the back, head, chest and neck and died immediately. Her husband was also hit in the back but managed to drive to Hebron, 12 kilometers away, where friends found him and took him to a hospital.

The Israeli military's version of the story was that "the soldiers opened fire after the vehicle's driver tried to run over one of the soldiers at the checkpoint." Reeves, who saw the death car, reports that "12 hours after the killing, [the car] was parked in a

weed-choked vacant lot in Nuba and children were clambering all over it. We found only two bullet holes in the front and at least a dozen in the rear. The back window was entirely smashed, opening the worn-looking interior, with its pools of blood and the ghastly detritus of a head wound, to the spring breeze. The front window was intact.”

Even though this incident is hauntingly similar to recent deaths in U.S. cities, in which police killed unknown suspects in a barrage of gunfire, American media reports place Mrs. Al-Aloul’s death entirely in the context of Israeli security concerns. United Press: “Soldiers trying to catch gunmen who shot and wounded three Israeli civilians in the West Bank opened fire at a Palestinian car and reportedly killed a woman and injured a man.” An army spokesman said that a car sped up to the [Sourif] roadblock, “turned around violently, tried to flee and overran one of the soldiers.” The soldiers “felt their lives were in danger, believed it was a terrorist squad,” and opened fire.

The *Chicago Tribune*, like the United Press, placed the incident in the context of Israeli security concerns.

On whose behalf will future popes and future world leaders need to issue preemptive apologies in the matter of Mrs. Al-Aloul’s death? We begin, of course, with her husband and her children, and the Palestinian people who will continue to live under continued violence long after a so-called peace agreement is reached.

But should we not also issue a preemptive apology to those Israeli soldiers, probably very young and no doubt very frightened, on duty at a temporary roadblock, surrounded by unknown foes, who must now know that the “enemy” they killed was a mother of 12? The pope is not directly responsible for the presence of these soldiers in the Hebron region, but as was the case with the Holocaust, neither he nor the rest of us have done enough to halt policies that lead to such violence.

Who should issue a preemptive apology for the death of Halima Al-Aloul? Begin with American media that report her death entirely from the perspective of what is good for Israeli security. Then include every American taxpayer who willingly or unwittingly supports a policy that allows a small number of Israeli settlers to live in Hebron, a Palestinian city, defended by Israeli soldiers who are stationed deep inside unfriendly territory.

Finally, be sure to include anyone, especially the Congress and the president, who have the power to change a Middle East policy that endorses and heavily finances a security system that leaves no one secure.