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A person stands on the top of rubble from destroyed buildings

Palestinians check destroyed homes in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip Oct. 29, 2023, following Israeli airstrikes amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestinian Islamist group Hamas. (OSV News/Reuters/Mohammed Salem)


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Jerusalem — October 30, 2023
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As the world prayed for peace in the Holy Land Oct. 27, Pope Francis called for the war to halt and prayers to continue during the Angelus Oct. 29, as the death toll in Gaza passed 8,000 and Israeli troops gradually increased their ground activity in the Gaza Strip, without calling it an "invasion."

"Let us not stop. Let us continue to pray for Ukraine, as well as for the serious situation in Palestine and Israel, and for other regions at war," the pope said.

"Particularly, in Gaza, may space be opened to guarantee humanitarian aid, and may the hostages be released right away. Let no one abandon the possibility that the weapons might be silenced -- let there be a ceasefire," the Holy Father urged.

In a recorded Oct. 25 YouTube video message, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, told the Christians in Gaza -- who he called his "dear ones" -- that he is dedicating all of his time not only in prayer for them but also in dialogue with all the responsible authorities in order to bring the Israel-Hamas war, now in its third week, to an end.

"What we are living now … is touching my heart, me personally but [also] all of our community," he said in the video, which he began with an Arabic greeting. "We are also very encouraged, I am very encouraged, by your testimony for the way you are living this terrible situation."

He said their testimony reminded him of the word of Jesus: "Do not be afraid of those that can kill the body but cannot kill the soul."

"I am with you in your suffering and your pain is my concern," he said. "You are not alone: all the Christian community in the Holy Land, not only in the Holy Land, but all over the world, is with you praying for you and supporting you."

There are some 1,000 Christians living in Gaza mainly belonging to the Latin Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches, with a small Baptist presence as well. The majority of the Christian community has taken shelter in the Holy Family Parish church compound after an Israeli missile landed next to the Greek Orthodox church compound, destroying part of the structure and killing 18 people.

"Now we have also 18 brothers and sisters who are in heaven praying for you and interceding for you and they are our strength," said Pizzaballa. "God is with you; we are with you. Be strong, one day I am sure, we will join again in Gaza … for prayer in joy and in peace."

On Oct. 7 thousands of Hamas terrorists breached the security fence separating Gaza from the southern Israeli agricultural communities on the border, and brutally murdered some 1,400 Israelis, mostly civilians including children and elderly, in their homes and at a dance party at a nearby kibbutz, and taking 239 people -- elderly, children and toddlers, and disabled -- hostages to Gaza, a new number confirmed to Fox News on Oct. 29.

Israel has since retaliated with airstrikes. Save the Children put the number of children killed in Gaza at 3,195 during the three weeks of fighting.

But as war rages in Gaza, settler violence is growing in the West Bank as all eyes are focused on the war, noted the Israeli nongovernmental organization Yesh Din, which documents and prosecutes instances of settler violence.

Since Oct. 7, the NGO said at least 82 Palestinians households were forcibly driven from their homes by settlers, who have been threatening farmers herding their flocks and now with the start of olive-picking season, also farmers tending their trees. On Oct. 22, for the first time, settlers threatened and beat farmers from Christ the Redeemer Parish in the West Bank Village of Taybeh as they began harvesting their olives, said parish priest Fr. Bashar Fawadleh.

"Our village is quiet. We are afraid, it is not safe. There has never been anything like this, not even during the second intifada," he said. "It is because of the fanatical trio in the Israeli government [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich and Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir.] This is the point we are now in. It is very dangerous," the priest said.

On Oct. 27, a Jewish settler fatally shot a Palestinian man harvesting olives near the city of Nablus.

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On Oct. 28, only three families were out picking their trees and only on lands close to the village with their cars facing in the direction of the village, so that in case the settlers came from over the ridge, they would be able to escape quickly, Fawadleh noted.

Netanyahu met with representatives of families of Israeli hostages held captive in Gaza, and pledged that Israel "will exhaust every possibility" to bring about their return, however he did not agree to release Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisons in return -- a move demanded by families of Israelis kidnapped by Hamas.

Prayers in the Holy Land continued to beseech for peace, and on Oct. 27 the Franciscan Friars in Jerusalem, led by the cardinal and the custos of the Holy Land, Fr. Franceso Patton, united with the call by Francis for a day of prayer and fasting by

walking the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem's Old City for the first time since the war broke out.

"The situation in Gaza is critical, with bombings and in all of Gaza Strip there is shortage of everything: water, fuel, food, medicines," said Mother María del Pilar Llerena Vargas, a Sister of Charity of the Incarnate Word from Peru, who is serving in the Catholic parish in Gaza, in a videotaped Spanish message on behalf of all the Christians of Gaza before she led the worshippers in a prayer for peace at the Holy Family Parish on the feast of Our Lady of Palestine.

"We all -- religious and lay -- are praying for peace and an end to the war, and for help to all the needy in the South and North of Gaza. We are grateful for the closeness of the Holy Father, and we thank all who pray and work for peace. We want to pray to the Virgin this beloved prayer of peace."

Another video posted on the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem Facebook page shows a group of children from the parish with their hands pressed together praying for peace during the feast of Our Lady of Palestine celebrations.

At the shrine of Deir Rafat, outside of Jerusalem, Pizzaballa presided over the eucharistic celebration followed by the traditional procession with the icon of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Palestine, who is the principal patroness of the diocese. The shrine was erected during another time of tensions, in 1929, and was chosen as a special place to pray for peace. However, because of the current state of war, where Hamas is still lobbying missiles into Israel, the faithful were not able to attend the traditional procession this year.

Earlier, in an open letter to the entire diocese, the cardinal noted that they were going through "one of the most difficult and painful periods" in recent times.

He condemned both the atrocities of Oct. 7 in southern Israel and the cycle of violence in Gaza.

"It is time to stop this war, this senseless violence," he said.

The only way for a serious peace process can begin by ending decades of occupation and "giving a clear and secure national perspective to the Palestinian people," he said.

"Unless this problem is solved at its root, there will never be the stability we all hope for. The tragedy of these days must lead us all, religious, political, civil society, international community, to a more serious commitment in this regard than what has been done so far," Pizzaballa said.

In John 16:33 Jesus spoke of courage, he noted: "Such peace, such love, require great courage," he said.