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A man wearing a cassock, pectoral cross and red zucchetto sits next to a nativity scene and b

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, gestures during an interview with OSV News at the Latin Patriarchate in the Old City of Jerusalem Dec. 12, 2023. (OSV News photo/Debbie Hill)



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While faith cannot change anything in moments of great darkness such as the one Israelis and Palestinians are currently living through in the Israeli-Hamas war, it can, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa said, create "a small light" which will give "orientation."

In times of darkness, faith is all you can have, but faith has many perspectives, said the cardinal, who is the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem.

"Faith is not just believing that God is there," he told OSV News in an interview Dec. 12 at the Latin Patriarchate. "Faith is also the ability to look beyond what you're seeing with a perspective that things will change, and that will give you the space to also live in the present."

Faith, he said, is also the ability to create unity in the community.

If, even while living in the darkness, all you can see is that darkness, you cannot move or think of where to go from there, he said.

In the 24 hours of a day, there is night but there is also day, and we know that night will end, he said.

"We want to be those people not of the night, but of the day, of the light. ... This is one moment of darkness, but we know that this moment will finish," said the patriarch. "In all situations of darkness, even the most horrible situations, there are always persons ... that are testimonies of light. [There are] people who are giving light: volunteers, those who are talking about reconciliation. ... There are many wonderful people everywhere, even here. Don’t allow the darkness to cover everything."

Pizzaballa returned to Jerusalem from Rome just days after the war broke out Oct. 7, after having been created a cardinal by Pope Francis Sept. 30 and the shift was "quite difficult," he said. Everything was "all new and so different, and [yet] also the same," he said. For him, everything changed so dramatically that it took time to understand what was happening and what were the right steps to take, the cardinal said.

"Everyone is so full of pain and hatred there is no space for the other," he said, and it is a challenge to keep that hate away from your heart as the world seems to be imposing it more and more every day.

In an Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel, Hamas militants killed 1,200 Israelis and took 239 people hostage, of whom 105 have been released and exchanged for 240 Palestinians.

Though statistics have become harder to compile in the Gaza Strip, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health -- which is run by Hamas -- almost 20,000 people have been killed since the start of the war. The ministry does not differentiate between civilians

and members of Hamas. But according to an Israeli study by Yagil Levy, a sociology professor at the Open University of Israel, published in the Ha'aretz newspaper, 61% of the casualties in the Israeli bombings are civilians. Two Christian women were killed Dec. 16 in what the patriarchate said was an Israeli military attack on the Holy Family Parish premises.

In this extremely difficult situation, everyone wants to win people's support for their own pain and suffering, noted Pizzaballa.

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"We as Christians need to be in solidarity and talk about justice and truth, without being exclusive," the patriarch said.

During Advent season, and as Christmas approaches, the situation of the Christian community in Gaza becomes more fragile by the day with little food, water, fuel or medicine, Pizzaballa said. And while it may seem "ridiculous" to talk about the words of love, hope, joy and peace, the act of lighting the Advent candles symbolizing these concepts is still important, he added.

"To talk about these words may not make sense now, but to do the gestures is important because when we are alone in this darkness, these gestures, the traditional gestures, are important to keep you alive," he said.

Everyone must follow his own personal journey, he said, but should use these words as their guidelines despite the suffering that nevertheless remains.

"Not all will be able to humanely accept them because the pain is too much to bear," he said.

"But you have to look in perspective. Now this is the moment of suffering, pain, you are unable to understand everything that is happening and why it is happening. We are all disoriented. We have to wait until all this finishes to see what to do and how to rebuild -- and not just physically."

As the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem have called on Christians to refrain from public festivities for Advent and Christmas celebrations this year -- in solidarity with those who are suffering and have lost homes and family members --

there will be more an emphasis on the spiritual and liturgical content of the holiday, Pizzaballa said.

The message of Christmas remains constant but for the cardinal personally it has turned to the concept of "there was no room for them" (Luke 2:7).

Right now, the patriarch emphasized that "Everyone is so full of pain and hatred there is no space for the other," he said, and it is a challenge to keep that hate away from your heart as the world seems to be imposing it more and more every day.

For him, the Palestinian question and finding a place for them can’t be addressed in those circumstances.

"The bottom line is that we need to find a place [for everyone] because there is a place."