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Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, walks through the ruins of buildings in Gaza City. He visited northern Gaza Strip May 16-19, 2024, during Pentecost. At a press conference May 20 following his return to Jerusalem, he said he found the small resilient community of the Holy Family Parish compound in Gaza City to have "steadfast faith" amid horrific destruction and constant bombardment. (OSV News/courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)



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Three hundred days after the outbreak of war in Gaza, the cardinal at the heart of the Holy Land said interreligious relations have reached a low point.

Dialogue between religious communities in the Holy Land is "in crisis," Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, patriarch of Jerusalem, said Aug. 20 during a presentation at the Meeting in Rimini, an annual event sponsored by the Communion and Liberation movement.

"Right now, Christians, Jews and Muslims cannot meet with one another, at least not publicly," he said. "Even at the institutional level it is a struggle to talk to one another."

While praising the many documents on interreligious dialogue produced in recent years, particularly the Document on Human Fraternity signed in 2019 by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Al-Azhar, the cardinal said that after the war in the Holy Land "we will need to begin a new phase" of interreligious dialogue and relations.

"In one way or another the war will end, and to rebuild the trust from these attitudes of distrust, of hate, of deep disdain will be an enormous effort," he said.

Yet he noted that "interreligious dialogue should be less for 'elites' and more among communities; it must reach the grassroots."

Religious leaders, he added, have a great responsibility to listen to other religious communities and represent their own faith as well as "to help your community not close itself into its own narrative about itself, but to lift their gaze to see and recognize the other."

Cardinal Pizzaballa also cited a quote by the Polish-American Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who said "no religion is an island."

"At this moment, I have the impression that we have returned to being a bit like islands, taking care of ourselves, but we need to raise our gaze and understand that we are not islands," the cardinal said.

Although he said there is no expectation that the Christian community in the Holy Land, which comprises less than 3% of the population, will have a role in resolving the war in Gaza, he said the region's Christians must advocate for the possibility of forgiveness in public debate, "even if it cannot be done at this moment," because forgiveness "is the only way to overcome this impasse."

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