News



Young Palestinians gather to receive food cooked by a charity kitchen, amid the Israel-Hamas conflict, in the northern Gaza Strip Sept. 11, 2024. (OSV News/Mahmoud Issa, Reuters)

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Gaza City, Gaza Strip — October 1, 2024

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Since Hamas' attack on Israel Oct. 7, 2023, and the immediate start of the Israel-Hamas war, Pope Francis has provided daily spiritual solace to Gaza Strip's only Catholic parish.

The parish's priests, women religious and congregation and some 500 people take refuge in Gaza City's Holy Family Church, so named because it's believed that Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus Christ passed through the area as they sought safety in neighboring Egypt, escaping King Herod's sword in the first century.

Although the church houses mainly displaced Christians, it also aids Muslims and has treated those injured in the attacks.

Father Gabriel Romanelli, the parish priest, and Father Youssef Assad, the assistant priest, minister to the people along with religious sisters from the orders of Missionaries of Charity, Institute of the Incarnate Word and the Congregation of the Rosary.

In May, Francis told "CBS Evening News" that during his daily phone calls to the parish, the people there "tell me about what happens there. It is very tough," stressing that there is "a lot of suffering" in Gaza. As throughout Gaza, the parish also faces a shortage of food, water and medicine, and during harsh winter temperatures, it also struggles with a lack of heating. "People rush quickly whenever food arrives," the pope told CBS.

On Francis' return from his recent demanding 12-day visit to Southeast Asia, he again mentioned his personal calls every evening with the Gaza parish. "They tell me ugly things, difficult things," he told reporters aboard the papal plane about the continuing crisis.

"Please, when you see the bodies of killed children, when you see that, under the presumption that some guerrillas are there, a school is bombed, this is ugly," the 87-year-old pontiff said. "It is ugly."

"I am sorry to have to say this," the pope said. "But I do not think that they are taking steps to make peace." Francis has repeatedly urged for an immediate cease-fire to take hold in Gaza to see badly needed food, medicine and other humanitarian supplies delivered as the conflict drags on.

"Father Assad told me that the pope before departing from Rome (to Asia) called him," Jordanian Father Rifat Bader of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem told OSV News. "The pope said he would pray for him during his visit and 'will try to contact you as I do every day.'"

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Bader, who directs the Catholic Center for Studies and Media in Jordan, said the pope then asked Assad and the community in Gaza to likewise pray for him while on his trip to Asia.

"This is very nice that the pope also not only prays for the people in Gaza, but he asks them to pray for him during his visit," he said, adding that Assad "was excited that the pope doesn't forget them, even during his longest journey abroad."

Bader has personal insight into the workings of the Gaza church because one of his cousins, a Rosary sister, continued to serve at the Holy Family Parish for six months after the crisis erupted.

Bader said that the fact that Francis picks up the phone every day to ask how the community is doing in such a dire war situation is very telling. "While the Holy See's diplomacy has its positions and makes its declarations, we cannot forget these personal, human initiatives that the pope is keeping — daily calling the priests and the nuns there (in Gaza) in order to give daily encouragement," he said.

The Holy Family Church has suffered a number of attacks over the past 12 months of conflict between Israel and Hamas.

The pontifical charity Aid to the Church in Need reported on Dec. 14, 2023, that shrapnel from Israeli airstrikes destroyed solar panels, water tanks and other structures on the parish complex.

Christians Nahida Khalil Anton and her daughter, Samar Kamal Anton, were killed two days later as they walked to the convent on the parish's complex.

In April, a 19-year-old woman sheltering in the parish with her mother died from heat stroke as she tried to flee the enclave. Her father had previously died in the Holy Family compound.

In July, a raid launched by Israeli forces against Latin Patriarchate's Holy Family School in Gaza City killed four people.

Bader sees Francis providing personal care to Gaza's displaced who are suffering great loss and trauma as the future ahead looms, with homes and livelihoods destroyed and lives taken.

"When a priest receives a call from the pope, it is a big thing inside the Catholic Church, you are talking with the successor of Peter. But when this thing is becoming a daily initiative of the pope, really this is a very human touch that the pope is putting inside the minds, the memories, the spirits of these people: priests and community," Bader underscored.

"This is a sign of encouragement, a sign of paternal care of the pope," he added.