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The cardinal vested in white, stands with many young peoples vested as acolytes, as well as t

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, is seen on a Dec. 22, 2024 photograph with the Gaza Strip Holy Family parish Christians. He was able to visit them ahead of Christmas in the 14th month of Israel-Hamas war that brought death and devastation to the Gaza Strip, where 500 Christians shelter in the parish premises. (OSV News/courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)



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"You have become the light of our Church in the entire world," Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa told Gaza Christians Dec. 22 during a pre-Christmas visit aiming to bring the joy of the season to the suffering Christian community in the Gaza Strip.

After passing the Erez crossing at dawn, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem said to Christians sheltering in the premises of Holy Family Parish in the war-torn Gaza Strip that that it was his "great joy at being among you today and extend to you the greetings of everyone who conveys their love, prayers and solidarity with you."

Visibly moved and in white vestments forecasting Christmas joy, Pizzaballa arrived at the Gaza City Catholic parish with suitcases full of gifts. During the Mass, he also imparted the sacrament of confirmation to a number of young people, Vatican News reported.

"At Christmas, we celebrate the light and ask: Where is this light? The light is here, in this church. The beginning of the light is Jesus Christ, who is the source of our life. If we are a light to the world, it is only because of Him. At Christmas, I pray that Jesus grants us this light," he said.

The visit marked the second time when the cardinal was able to join the Gaza community and their parish pastor, Father Gabriel Romanelli. The last time he was able to cross to Gaza was in May.

The Gaza Strip is devastated by 14 months of Israel-Hamas retaliation war that has killed 45,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza health ministry. The war was launched after the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack in which 1,200 Israelis lost their lives.

"We are living in a time filled with darkness, and there is no need to elaborate because you know it well," the cardinal told the Christian community. "In these moments, we must first look to Jesus, for He gives us the strength to endure this dark time. Over the past year, we have learned that we cannot rely on humans. How many promises were made and never fulfilled? And how much violence and hatred arose because of people?"

While the unspeakable suffering of the Gaza community continues, Israeli families also have lived in darkness for over a year since 96 of the roughly 250 people taken hostage by Hamas during the attack on Oct. 7, 2023, remain in Hamas custody.

"To remain steadfast in hope, we must be deeply rooted in Jesus," Pizzaballa said. "If we are connected to Him, we can look at one another in a different way."

He urged the community of Christians not to lose hope.

"When the war ends, we will rebuild everything: Our schools, our hospitals and our homes. We must remain resilient and full of strength."

Visibly moved, he said: "I repeat: We will never abandon you, and we will do everything we can to support and assist you."

He also urged "not allow hatred to infiltrate our hearts. If you want to remain a light, we must make our hearts available for Jesus alone."

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The Catholic community in Gaza City suffered many losses in the last year, still remembering the attack from Dec. 16, 2023, just before Christmas, when an Israel Defense Forces sniper shot and killed Nahida Khalil Anton, and her daughter, Samar Kamal Anton, as they walked to a convent at the Holy Family Parish compound in Gaza. The convent of the Missionaries of Charity also was targeted.

In April, a 19-year-old young woman died from heatstroke as she tried to flee the Gaza Strip with her mother to Egypt. Her father died from lack of medicine earlier during the year.

In July, an Israeli air strike targeted two classrooms on the ground floor of Holy Family school sheltering a large number of displaced Palestinian families — an attack the Latin patriarchate strongly condemned.

"Despite the violence we witnessed this past year, we also witnessed many miracles," Pizzaballa said. "Amidst the darkness, there were people who wanted to help and did not let anything stand in their way. The whole world, not just Christians, wanted to support and stand with you," he said.

"The war will end, and we will rebuild again, but we must guard our hearts to be capable of rebuilding. We love you, so never fear and never give up," he encouraged the Gaza City Christians, of whom around 500 still remain in the premises of Holy Family Parish.

"One of you once said to me: 'As Christians, there is no violence in our blood. We want to remain Christians and remain the light in this place,'" the cardinal said.

"Thank you for everything you do. You may not notice it in your difficult daily life, but the whole world does. We are all proud of you, not only for what you do but because you have preserved your identity as Christians belonging to Jesus," he concluded. "Do be afraid, for no one can take Christ's light from us. Continue to give the good testimony of the Christian faith. Merry Christmas!"

On Dec. 24, the Christmas Eve, the patriarch will make his solemn entry into Bethlehem, in the West Bank, where he will celebrate Christmas Eve Mass in St. Catherine's Church, located right next to the Basilica of Nativity.