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Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa is seen Dec. 22, 2024, visiting an elderly Palestinian man shel

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa is seen Dec. 22, 2024, visiting an elderly Palestinian man sheltering on the premises of Holy Family Catholic Parish in Gaza City in the war-torn Gaza Strip. The cardinal made a pre-Christmas visit aiming to bring the joy of the season to the suffering Christian community in the 14th month of Israel-Hamas war. (OSV News photo/courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)



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Jerusalem — December 24, 2024

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Speaking just hours after his wartime Christmas visit to Gaza City Holy Family Parish, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, delivered a poignant Christmas message during a press conference at the Latin Patriarchate Dec. 23.

The cardinal called for renewed hope and solidarity in a region marked by violence, displacement and despair.

"The Lord's Nativity is near, and as every year, despite everything, we want it to be a moment of peace, joy and hope," Pizzaballa said. "This year, the Nativity also marks the beginning of the Jubilee, a year dedicated to hope. We need hope in this land, marked by so much violence, hatred and wounded by contempt and fear."

The cardinal drew from the Gospel account of the shepherds in Bethlehem, highlighting their role in discovering hope through Christ. He said, "The shepherds are told that the Savior is born for them, precisely for them. A Savior has come, and he has come for you."

The outspoken leader of the church in the Holy Land managed to get into the Gaza Strip through the Erez crossing on Dec. 22 and recounting his overnight visit, Pizzaballa described scenes of profound suffering juxtaposed with what he characterized as "hopeful" signs of resilience. He said the destruction he saw in May "was already enormous, now it is much more."

He detailed the harsh living conditions: open garbage piles, sewage, the acrid smell of decay and streets reduced to rubble full of children, many without shoes. "It was really very difficult from a human point of view."

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, looks at the destruction on the s

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, looks at the destruction on the streets of Gaza City Dec. 22, 2024. He made a pre-Christmas visit aiming to bring the joy of the season to the suffering Christian community in the Gaza Strip in the 14th month of Israel-Hamas war. (OSV News photo/courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)

Despite the dire circumstances, the cardinal witnessed a remarkable spirit among Gaza's residents. "I saw people still able to smile, to find joy in simple things." Pizzaballa reiterated the church's commitment to supporting Gaza's Christian community, which he described as deeply fatigued yet determined.

The cardinal's pre-Christmas visit centered on activities in Holy Family Parish in Gaza and the families sheltering in the school in the church's compound. Notably, he observed a lack of anger or blame among the many Christian families he visited, describing their resilience as "a sign of hope."

Aiming to bring the joy of the season to the suffering community, Pizzaballa told Gaza Christians that they "have become the light" of the Catholic Church "in the entire world."

"They are asking for school," the cardinal said at the Jerusalem press briefing, pointing to this request as a sign that families are not giving up. School is more important to families than water, housing or food, the cardinal explained. "It means that you are still determined to continue, to invest in your life there," he said.

When in Gaza Dec. 22, he told the Holy Family community: "When the war ends, we will rebuild everything: Our schools, our hospitals and our homes. We must remain resilient and full of strength."

Some 500 Christians shelter on the premises of Holy Family Parish.

Visibly moved, the cardinal told them: "I repeat: We will never abandon you, and we will do everything we can to support and assist you."

Faithful are seen in the Holy Family Parish's church in Gaza City Dec. 22, 2024. Cardinal Pierb

Faithful are seen in the Holy Family Parish's church in Gaza City Dec. 22, 2024. Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, made the pre-Christmas visit aiming to bring the joy of the season to the suffering Christian community in the 14th month of Israel-Hamas war. (OSV News photo/courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)

Pizzaballa celebrated an early Christmas Mass in the Gaza City Catholic parish, paying a visit to families, elderly and disabled living in the compound. During the Mass, he also imparted the sacrament of confirmation to three young people, and distributed the gifts he managed to bring.

In response to questions, the cardinal encouraged pilgrims to return to the Holy Land, highlighting their vital role in sustaining the region's Christian communities. "Pilgrims are part of the Holy Land's identity. Their absence impacts not just the spiritual but also the economic life of many families, particularly in Bethlehem," he said, urging visitors not to be deterred by fear.

"Pilgrimage is safe. Come, as the shepherds did, to Bethlehem." He pointed out that "the two main sources of income, from the economic point of view -- pilgrimages and

working in Israel -- are now stopped for different reasons as everyone knows," the cardinal explained. "We also had the COVID-19 pandemic before, so for many, many families, it's becoming very problematic."

"It's not the first time we've had a crisis like this," the cardinal said, adding that actions and gestures give credibility to hope.

The cardinal also called for new political leadership in the region to address the root causes of instability and enact changes on the ground. "We cannot build a new future with the same faces." Despite being a small presence in the region, the cardinal insisted that the Catholic Church could help foster the cooperation necessary for future collaboration among a responsible team of new leaders who "have the courage to meet and organize something together." Changes are "really very dramatically needed," he said.

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Pizzaballa addressed the emigration of Christians from the Holy Land, particularly from Gaza and the West Bank. He denied claims that the church encourages emigration, emphasizing that the church supports individuals' freedom of choice while striving to help them remain. "The idea that we encourage immigration is false. Our mission is to protect and support them as much as possible."

As the Holy Land faces one of its most challenging Christmas seasons in recent memory, Pizzaballa's message centered on the enduring power of hope and the importance of solidarity. "Jesus enters history this way, as one who cannot find a place, who does not impose himself, who does not demand, who does not make war to find a place."

The cardinal concluded with a heartfelt invitation to the global Christian community: "This Christmas, let us make room for those who have no place and journey together toward the One who brings peace, joy and hope."

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 the Nativity.