News



Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, parish priest of Holy Family Church in Gaza City, lights a candle Dec. 22, 2024. (OSV News/Courtesy of Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)



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This story was originally published on Jan. 2, 2025. We republish it here in light of Pope Francis' death.

The incessant sounds of bombing have become a grim backdrop for Fr. Gabriel Romanelli's days in Gaza.

But one moment each day offers powerful solace.

The pastor of the Holy Family parish in Gaza — and one of the only three Catholic priests left in Gaza — has received a phone call from Pope Francis every day since Oct. 7, 2023, promptly at 8 p.m., in which the pontiff usually asks him about how the children and the most vulnerable are doing.

"These short phone calls give us immense strength," Romanelli said in a WhatsApp video interview with the National Catholic Reporter.

Of Gaza's 2.3 million residents, about 1,000 are Christians. Since the war began, at least 45 Christians have died, including 20 violently. The Greek Orthodox Church of St. Porphyrios, a historic refuge, was bombed in October 2023, killing 18.

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Also native of Francis' Argentinia, Romanelli serves a Catholic parish of 135 people.

"We are fine and trying to continue our usual, normal daily life," he said, his voice calm but weighted with the anguish of a community besieged by war. "The most important urgency of all is peace."

Yet, peace remains elusive in the Zaytun neighborhood, one of the oldest parts of Gaza, where he and his parish serve as an anchor for thousands of displaced people.

The numbers paint a stark picture: 2,200 people in the Zaytun neighborhood, the Old City of Gaza, alone depend on the Catholic parish for essentials like food, water and medical assistance. Across northern Gaza, the scale of need dwarfs the

resources available.

"We've helped more than 7,000 families — 41,000 people — but that's only 10% of the population here," Romanelli said.

The struggle to secure even basic nutrition is a daily ordeal.

"For more than a year, people had only flour, and so many lost so many kilograms. After that, they let in some canned food, some fava beans, however, we did not eat any vegetables and fresh fruit for almost a year," he said.

"Once, we distributed some chicken — it was like a big feast."



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

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza extends beyond food shortages. "There is garbage everywhere, and sometimes they burn it in the air," he said.

Romanelli said there has been a rise in skin infections and illnesses like salmonella, which he also contracted.

Internal Gazan refugees live in dire conditions, often crammed into the church school classrooms or huddling in the rubble of bombed-out buildings. At his parish, 500 people are currently taking refuge, relying on limited energy resources like a damaged generator and a few solar panels.

"For those with serious illnesses, it's almost a death sentence," Romanelli said.

Hospitals are overwhelmed or destroyed, leaving thousands without access to treatment. A colon cancer survivor, Romanelli said his own follow-up care has been deferred. "My oncologist told me I could wait. I feel fine anyway."

Despite overwhelming challenges, Romanelli and two other priests of the Incarnate Word congregation strive to nurture the spiritual life of their parishioners.

"We do adoration to the Blessed Sacrament for an hour every day in silence. In the afternoon we do rosary and Holy Mass," the priest said. "One of us is always available for confession."



On Jan. 7, 2024, the feast of Epiphany, Fr. Youssef Asaad, an assistant priest at the Holy Family Parish in Gaza City, administers the sacrament of first Communion to

one of eight children of the parish after they completed their preparation program and education, despite the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. (OSV News/Courtesy of Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)

In addition to functioning as a shelter in which to sleep at night and carry out daily life activities, the parish is also hosting a small dispensary and an analysis laboratory to help the sick.

"The house of Jesus is everyone's house, and Jesus feels happy about that," he said with a smile.

The challenges in the West Bank are no less profound for Catholic Palestinian priests, especially in the areas where Palestinians face daily threats from the Israeli settlers and the Israeli military checkpoints. Fr. Firas Abedrabbo, pastor* at a parish composed of just 400 Catholics at Ain Arik near Ramallah, said that the conflict has added layers of complexity to his ministry.

"I understand the occupation and the need to resist it, but as a Christian, I cannot accept any form of resistance that targets civilians," he said.

Economic hardship looms large as many parishioners have lost jobs due to movement restrictions imposed by the Israeli military checkpoints in the West Bank.

"We have the impression that they are imprisoning us in ghettos, and all the other lands around are taken by the settlements," Abedrabbo* said. "Palestinians in the West Bank are living in their cities and villages, they move, but there could be always a checkpoint here, or there's a lot of control, humiliation, inspections, closed barriers. You never know which time you arrive."

"This reality changed me. I've seen the ugly side of the world and understood that dogmatic Christianity isn't enough here. Life, human dignity and justice become more urgent."



Smoke rises following an Israeli airstrike as displaced Palestinians make their way to flee areas in the eastern part of Khan Younis following an Israeli evacuation order, amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip Oct. 7, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Hatem Khaled)

At Our Lady of the Annunciation in Beit Jala, pastor Fr. Hanna Mass'ad, serves about 3,000 parishioners, who have been particularly hard-hit because of the complete halt in tourism and pilgrimages, the lifeline of Bethlehem Christian residents.

"Our people here are Palestinians, as are the people of Gaza. We suffer on both sides. In the West Bank, the suffering is a little bit different — we are not under bombardment, but the Israeli army can enter anywhere, anytime. We are in a big prison," the priest said.

The church's aid, supported by appeals made by the Latin Patriarchate to Catholic communities worldwide, provides some relief. However, it is far from enough.

"People come to me saying, 'Abuna, help us. We don't have food, we can't pay for medicines or school fees,' " he said. "Many are now considering leaving the Holy Land in search of a better future."

The ongoing economic and political challenges faced by the Christian population in the West Bank have reached alarming levels, according to Sami El-Yousef, CEO of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

"Unemployment has shot up through the roof," he said. The Palestinian Authority also cannot pay civil servants due to the lack of tax revenue transfers from Israel. El-Yousef said roughly 120,000 households once relied on daily work in Israel, but with the suspension of permits to work there, most jobs have evaporated.



Faithful, including a religious sister, are seen praying in the Holy Family Parish church in Gaza City Dec. 22, 2024. Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, celebrated Mass during 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/Courtesy of Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)

The Latin Patriarchate has provided temporary relief through food distribution, tuition assistance and support for rent and medical expenses. The Patriarchate also has developed employment initiatives that have created hundreds of jobs.

Despite these efforts, El-Yousef acknowledged limits. "We don't have too many cards to play in that end," he said.

Romanelli said that his faith remains unshaken. "I have never had temptations against faith; in fact, it has strengthened me," he said. "We weary God with our prayers, but he listens. The cross of the Lord was history's great smash, but also its great triumph."

**This article has been updated to correct Abedrabbo's position at the parish, and to correct a quote misattribution that was due to editing error.*

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.