Vatican
Vatican News



Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, patriarch of Jerusalem, speaks at a conference at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome May 2, 2024. (CNS/Justin McLellan)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — May 2, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A native Italian but who has lived in the Holy Land for three decades, Franciscan Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa is among the most talked-about front-runners to succeed the late Pope Francis, who made Pizzaballa a cardinal in 2023.

Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem since November 2020, offers an attractive profile: a thoughtful churchman who speaks fluent Italian, Hebrew and English, and limited Arabic, and comes from the peace-loving Franciscan tradition at a time when much of the world is at war.

At age 60, he bears an undeniably impressive resume. And yet, his relatively youthful age is likely what will rule him out as a potential pope in this conclave.

The cardinal's profile notched up notably on Oct. 7, 2023, after the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel thrust him onto the global stage. He has since walked a political and theological tightrope.

Advertisement

Pizzaballa has long been invested in deepening Jewish-Catholic relations. However, following Israel's siege on Gaza, he has ratcheted up his criticisms of the Israeli government and called for an end to the war.

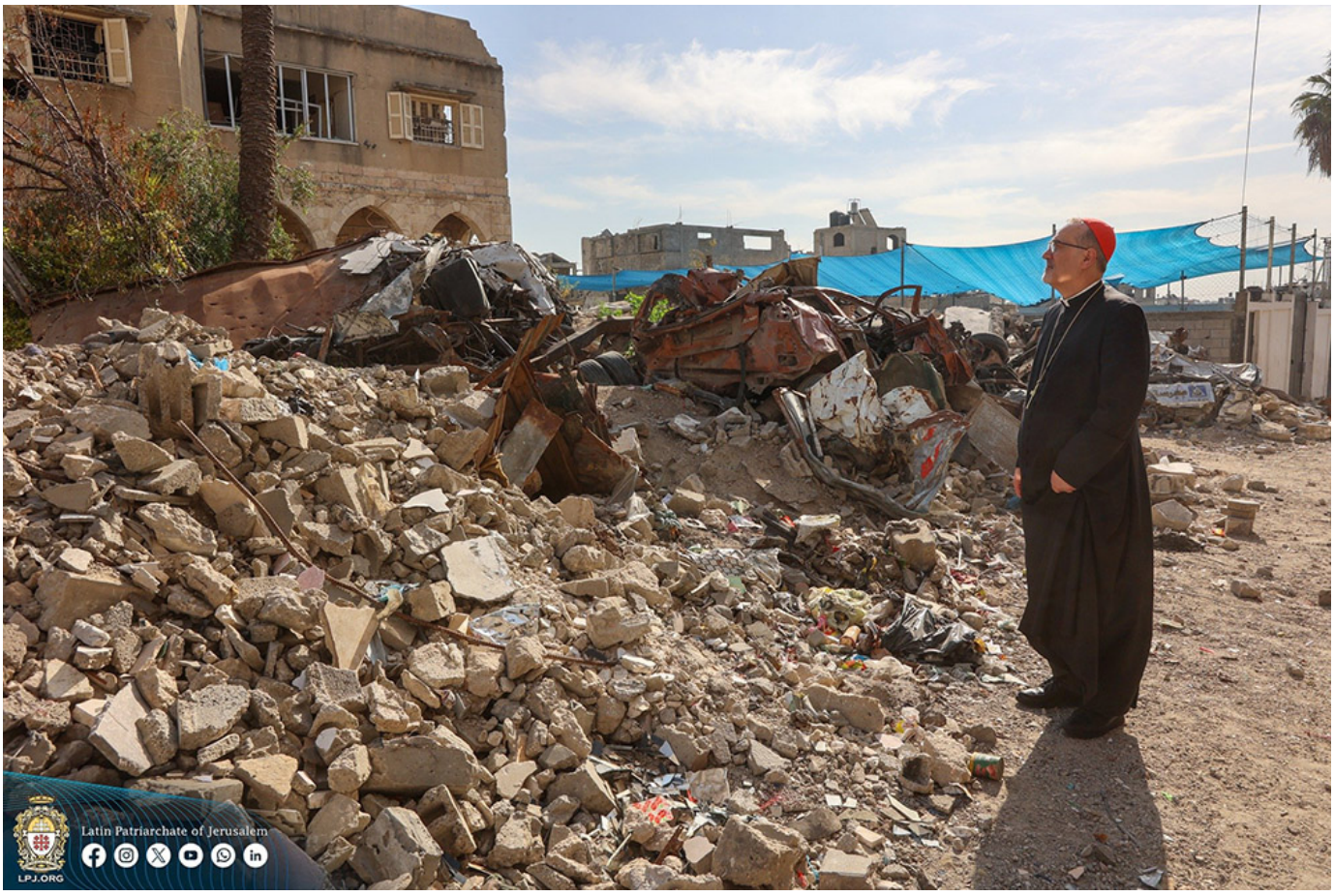
At the same time, he offered himself in exchange for the Israeli hostages being held in Gaza, making him a hero to many Israelis who saw the gesture as a supremely sacrificial act.

On Dec. 21, Francis said that, on the previous day, Israel hadn't allowed the cardinal to visit the Christian parish in Gaza. The pope noted that "children were bombed" on the same day. Francis condemned the actions, saying it was not war, but cruelty that motivated the decision. Ultimately, Pizzaballa visited the parish on Dec. 22.

Around the Vatican, Pizzaballa's candidacy has gained support from those on both ends of the conservative and progressive spectrum. He has spoken in support of migrants and the need for women's leadership. He has not spoken out forcefully on

other hot button social issues, but his theology leans in a fairly traditional direction.

A native of Northern Italy, the future cardinal as a young boy preferred his Catholic catechism to toys, his mother has said.



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/Courtesy of Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)

In 1976, he entered minor seminary with the Franciscans in Bologna, Italy, and made his perpetual vows there in 1989.

Beginning in 1993, with studies in Jerusalem, he began his long relationship with what would become his adopted homeland.

Pizzaballa has taught biblical Hebrew, overseen the translation of the Roman Missal into Hebrew and served as "custos" of the Holy Land, responsible for overseeing all

of the holy places. In these roles, he has become a reference point not only for Christians of the region, but for Jews and Muslims, too.

Within the Catholic Church, Pizzaballa has earned high regard for both his diplomatic savvy and business acumen.

In 2014, Francis entrusted him to organize the prayer for peace in the Vatican Gardens with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and Israel's then-President Shimon Peres, along with the pope and Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

Pizzaballa also has won praise for his efforts to clean up the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem's debts, including establishing an economic advisory committee.

Inside the Vatican, he has served as a member of the Dicasteries for Eastern Churches and for Promoting Christian Unity.



Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, blesses participants with holy water at the Church of the Baptism of the Lord at Al-Mughtas, Jordan, Jan. 10, 2025, during the consecration and inauguration of the church in the presence of papal representative, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican's secretary of state. (OSV

News/Courtesy of Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)

Born in 1965, Pizzaballa faces stiff odds.

While he has earned the respect of many in Rome and elsewhere, it is highly unlikely that the cardinal electors will be willing to back a candidate for a lifetime appointment job who could conceivably reign for some 30 years.

That's because Pope John Paul II's long pontificate haunts many inside the Vatican to this day. John Paul II's prolonged battle with Parkinson's disease meant the church was governed by his aides operating as his proxies.

Since a conclave usually is an audition for possible popes, it's a sensible bet that this one will only increase Pizzaballa's star power but is unlikely to put him in center stage just yet.

This is part of a series on the leading candidates in the 2025 papal election. The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

This story appears in the **Papal front-runners: The men who could be pope** and **Who will be the next pope?** feature series.