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Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa and Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilo

Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, parish priest of the Holy Family Church; Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem; and Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III visit the Holy Family Church in Gaza City July 18. A day earlier, the Israeli army struck the church in an attack that killed three and injured others. (CNS/Courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)



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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a phone call with Pope Leo XIV on July 18 expressed Israel's regret for what he called an accidental attack on the Holy Family Catholic Church in Gaza that killed three and injured 10 others.

Leo received the call from the Israeli leader and urged "a ceasefire and an end to the war," the Vatican press office said. "He again expressed his concern for the dramatic humanitarian situation of the people in Gaza, whose heartbreaking price is paid especially by children, the elderly and the sick."

Netanyahu, in a July 18 post from the prime minister's account on X, "expressed Israel's regret for the tragic incident in which stray ammunition accidentally struck The Holy Family Church in Gaza."

The Israeli strike July 17 hit the Holy Family compound in Gaza City. The church, which has become a refuge for both Christians and Muslims, was sheltering hundreds of people, including children with disabilities. Photos from the scene show part of the roof blown away near the church's stone cross, with charred walls and shattered windows.

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said the three dead were identified as Najwa Abu Daoud, 69, Foumia Issa Latif Ayyad, 84, and Saad Issa Kostandi Salameh, 60. Two of the people killed were Orthodox Christians whose funeral was celebrated at St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza City on July 17.

The pope also called Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, who visited the damaged parish and nearby medical facilities July 18 with Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem.

Calling from his summer residence outside Rome, Leo asked Pizzaballa about the conflict in Gaza and the condition of Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, the Holy Family pastor who was also injured in what the Vatican called the "unjustifiable attack."

The patriarchate said that Romanelli's injuries were minor and published photos showed him with a bandage on his leg. The priest was in daily contact with Pope Francis from the outbreak of the war in October 2023 until Francis died April 21.

In the phone call to Pizzaballa, the pope "expressed his support and affection to the entire community gathered around the parish and those suffering from the violence, and reiterated his intention to do everything possible to stop the needless slaughter of innocents," the Vatican press office said.

Leo also called Fr. Carlos Ferrero, the superior of Romanelli's religious order, the Institute of the Incarnate Word, to express his closeness to the religious community.



Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, pastor at Holy Family Catholic Church in Gaza City, prays with parishioners July 17 before an Israeli strike hit the church compound, killing three and injuring 10, including the priest. (Courtesy of Gabriel Romanelli)

The phone call from Netanyahu marked Leo's first public communication with the Israeli leader. After Leo's Mass of inauguration on May 18, the new pope met with Israeli President Isaac Herzog. The new pontiff has publicly called for a ceasefire since the first days of his pontificate.

The July 17 strike is under investigation by the Israeli Defense Forces, which said in a post on X that it "makes every feasible effort to mitigate harm to civilians and religious structures."

In a rare move, the Israeli Foreign Ministry issued a public apology July 17 expressing "deep sorrow" over the damage and civilian casualties, while insisting that "Israel never targets churches or religious sites."

Pizzaballa told Vatican News he believes the shell came from an Israeli tank. "What we know for sure is that a tank, the IDF says by mistake, but we are not sure about this, they hit the church directly," he said.

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About 1,000 Christians remain in Gaza, most of them Orthodox. The Latin community numbers about 135 people. Yet the Holy Family compound has become a spiritual and humanitarian lifeline in the midst of conflict, sheltering about 500 Christians, according to the news agency of the Italian bishops' conference.

The Catholic charity Caritas Jerusalem said in a July 17 statement on its website that Romanelli had been urging residents to remain in their rooms in the hours before the attack — a decision that may have prevented even greater loss of life.

"If Father Gabriel hadn't warned us to stay inside, we could have lost 50 to 60 people today," said a Caritas staff member who was not identified in the statement. "It would have been a massacre."

*The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.*