News

The Vatican City flag flies July 18 at Holy Family Church in Gaza City.

The Vatican City flag flies July 18 at Holy Family Church in Gaza City which was hit in an Israeli strike July 17, killing three and injuring 10. Holy Family is the only Catholic church in Gaza City, and it has sheltered Muslims and Christians during the war. (OSV News/Reuters/Khamis Al-Rifi)



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Situated in a predominantly Muslim enclave in Gaza City, Holy Family Catholic Church has long served the broader community, offering education, food and shelter to those in need, winning praise around the world during the war in Gaza.

The tiny parish's profile was elevated worldwide by a simple daily gesture, when Pope Francis called the church every evening from the start of the war in Gaza until he died in April.

That's why the July 17 strike of Holy Family by an Israeli tank, killing three and wounding the pastor, Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, has struck a symbolic and humanitarian nerve.

U.S. Catholic institutions and peace advocates condemned and mourned the deadly strike, calling for an immediate ceasefire, protection of civilians and accountability.

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. In the call, Leo expressed deep concern over the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza, particularly its devastating impact on children, the elderly and the sick, the Vatican press office said.

> 'This carnage must end.'
> —Judy Coode
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The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, represented by its president, Archbishop Timothy Broglio, issued a statement expressing deep sorrow and reiterating a call for peace.

"With the Holy Father, the Catholic bishops of the United States are deeply saddened to learn about the deaths and injuries at Holy Family Church in Gaza caused by a military strike," Broglio said in the July 17 statement. "Our first concern, naturally, goes out to Fr. Gabriele Romanelli and all his parishioners, most especially to the families of those killed. Our prayers are for them during these tragic times."

Johnathan Kuttab, executive director of Friends of Sabeel North America and a longtime human rights attorney in Israel and the West Bank, said he was happy to see Broglio's statement because many U.S. bishops have said little.

"It is actually very good to see the hierarchy of the church take position," Kuttab said. "The fact that the Holy Father was calling this particular church every single day before he passed away probably gave people some measure of protection or safety."



Palestinian Catholic children point out the top of Holy Family Catholic Church in Gaza City to Latin Patriarch Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa on July 18. The site was damaged by an Israeli strike July 17. (Courtesy of Gabriel Romanelli)

In addition to the deaths and injuries, the June 17 air strike caused widespread damage to the parish complex.

In previous interviews with NCR, Romanelli said the area surrounding the church has been serving as a refuge for about 7,000 people, both Catholic and non-Catholic, including many disabled children and individuals served by Mother Teresa's order, the Missionaries of Charity.

The incident casts a renewed spotlight on the status of religious minorities in conflict zones and raises questions about military operations that endanger the sanctity of protected sites. Churches for Middle East Peace, a U.S.-based ecumenical

organization, condemned the attack in the "strongest possible terms," describing it as both a violation of international humanitarian law and a desecration of a sanctuary.

"This horrific attack marks the sixth assault on Christian churches in Gaza since October 2023," Churches for Middle East Peace said in a statement. "Targeting a holy site and humanitarian refuge is a blatant violation of international law, an assault on human dignity, and an egregious desecration of a place of worship that should be a sanctuary at all times, especially in times of war."

Israel's Foreign Ministry issued a public apology on July 17, expressing "deep sorrow" for the casualties and damage while asserting that Israel does not intentionally target churches or religious sites.



Palestinian Catholics attend Mass at Holy Family Catholic Church in Gaza July 18 with Latin Patriarch Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who made a special visit after an Israeli strike hit the the site July 17. (Courtesy of Gabriel Romanelli)

Holy Family, the only Catholic church in Gaza, has been previously been struck by violence during the war. In late 2023, two Christian women in the church courtyard were killed, reportedly by IDF sniper fire, Vatican News reported. Parts of the church infrastructure had been damaged in prior strikes. This July 17 bombing reignited concerns over the safety of religious minorities in Gaza and the ongoing erosion of Christian presence in the region.

"We didn't expect something like this," said Jordan Denari Duffner, a scholar of Muslim-Christian relations and a member of the Catholic Advisory Council for Churches for Middle East Peace.

"The church has not been immune from attacks," Duffner said in an interview with the National Catholic Reporter. "I was shocked and disturbed, especially because I've been in correspondence with a few of the young people there. I look at the photos on Facebook every day that the parish posts. I was just really struck and saddened."

Duffner worries about the future of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land and fading hope among Christian youth.

About 1,000 Christians remain in Gaza, most of them Orthodox.

"In Gaza, life is crumbling," she said. "People don't have access to basic necessities — food, water, shelter, let alone education. Even in the West Bank, Christian young people increasingly don't see a future for themselves there."

The Vatican, meanwhile, remains in communication with local church authorities and humanitarian agencies. On July 18, Netanyahu told Pope Leo by phone that the shelling was an accident, which Israeli Defense Forces are investigating. On social media, Netanyahu said that the damage was caused by stray ammunition and was not an intentional bombing of a religious site.

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Judy Coode, a spokeswoman for Pax Christi USA, a Catholic peace organization, condemned the strike and called for an end to U.S. military aid to Israel.

"Pax Christi USA is horrified by the attack on Holy Family parish in Gaza," Coode said in an interview. "These attempts to clear Palestinians from their land must end.

Christian Palestinians and their Muslim neighbors have suffered far too much. The United States must stop arming Israel."

The Israel-Hamas war in Gaza has lasted more than 650 days. It began Oct. 7, 2023, with a surprise attack by Hamas on Israel.

"This carnage must end," Coode said.

Suhail Abu Dawoud, a Palestinian Catholic who attends Holy Family, was injured in the strike. In an interview with L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican's newspaper, he thanked people for their prayers and said he was feeling better after shrapnel was removed from his internal organs.

"I hope I can start my life again," he said in a video from the hospital in Ashdot, Israel. "And, as always, love is stronger than war."