Vatican

Vatican News



Damage can be seen next to the cross on the roof of the Holy Family Church in Gaza after it was hit in an attack July 17, 2025. Three people died and another 10 were injured, including the parish priest, Father Gabriel Romanelli, who sustained a slight injury to his right leg. (CNS/Courtesy of Aid to the Church in Need, UK)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

July 21, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called Pope Leo XIV on Monday (July 21) to discuss the war in Gaza and violence in the West Bank as the pastor of a Catholic church in Gaza told a newspaper that a recent shelling of his parish was "terrible" and that "the situation continues to be very serious."

During the call with Abbas, Leo "repeated his appeal for international humanitarian law to be fully respected, emphasizing in particular the obligation to protect civilians and sacred places, the prohibition of the indiscriminate use of force and of the forced transfer of the population," the Holy See Press Office said in a statement.

The call to Leo came after an Israeli strike hit Gaza's only Catholic church, Holy Family, on July 17, killing three and injuring 10 others — including the church's pastor, Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, who was lightly injured in the leg.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the pope to express Israel's regret for what he called an accidental attack. Stray ammunition, Netanyahu later wrote in a post on X, "accidentally struck The Holy Family Church in Gaza."

In the pope's call with the Palestinian president "emphasis was placed on the urgent need to provide assistance to those most vulnerable to the consequences of the conflict and to allow the adequate entry of humanitarian aid," the Vatican said in its

statement.

Leo also recalled the tenth anniversary of the Holy See's 2015 agreement with Palestine that established diplomatic relations between them.



Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa entered the Gaza Strip July 18, 2025 together with Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III, offering his support, closeness and prayers following the Israeli army's July 17 attack on Holy Family Parish in Gaza City. Cardinal Pizzaballa in Gaza City until July 20, and is seen offering Sunday morning Mass July 20 in the parish church, accompanied by Fr. Gabriel Romanelli. (OSV News/Courtesy of Holy Family Parish)

In an interview with L'Osservatore Romano, Romanelli asked the universal church community for prayers. "Let's try to convince the whole world to end this war," he said.

Romanelli said the shrapnel that hit the church damaged part of the roof, barely missing the iconic cross.

"That cross you see is nearly two meters tall, so it's large, and the shrapnel, not only the shrapnel, but also the rocks fell on two elderly women who were under the church in a tent, and they died," Romaneli said.

"The metal fragments injured many others. There were 15 wounded, three of whom have died. The doorman, Saad, died, along with the two elderly women," the parish pastor explained to the Vatican flagship newspaper and its journalist Roberto Cetera.

The parishioners confirmed dead by the Latin Patriarchate were Saad Salameh, 60, Fumayya Ayyad, 84, and Najwa Abu Daoud, a woman in her 70s. Salameh was the parish's janitor and was in the yard at the time of explosions, said a July 17 press release from Caritas Internationalis, the Catholic Church's international humanitarian arm.

Ayyad was sitting inside a Caritas psychological support tent when the blast sent shrapnel to the area and fatally injured her. Abu Daoud was sitting in the same tent as Ayyad, the patriarchate's CEO Sami El-Yousef confirmed July 17 to OSV News.

Romanelli said two people remain seriously wounded — not in life-threatening condition anymore, "but they're still in very serious condition."

"Najeeb is still hospitalized at the Anglican hospital, with a punctured lung." He said the other injured person is "Suhail, our postulant, our religious brother ... a very capable young man, very apostolic."

Romanelli said that the young man injured is an aspiring priest.

"Since he was 15, he felt his calling, and he was supposed to be in seminary two years ago, but the war started, and he couldn't leave or travel to officially begin his novitiate. He's very active here in the parish," Romanelli said. "He suffered a severe injury and had surgery, and now he faces a long recovery. So please pray for these two, who are the most seriously injured. The rest of the wounded are doing well."

Advertisement

Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa entered the Gaza Strip July 18 together with Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III, offering his support, closeness and prayers following the July 17 attack.

Pizzaballa remained in Gaza City until July 20, and said Sunday morning Mass in the parish church. Pictures posted on parish's Facebook showed him taking pictures with parishioners, clearly comforted by his presence, and videos circulating on social media also showed him playing with parish children.

"It was a deeply heartfelt visit, truly beautiful. In the midst of this tragedy, we've felt comfort, prayer, the closeness of our pastors, all the faithful, and all people of goodwill," Romanelli said.

In the morning of July 18, Pope Leo XIV received a phone call at his residence in Castel Gandolfo from Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"During the conversation, the Holy Father renewed his appeal for renewed momentum in the negotiations and for a ceasefire and an end to the war," a statement from the Vatican following the call said.

"I believe it was appropriate," Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state, said of Netanyahu's phone call July 18 in his phone interview with RAI, an Italian television channel.

"It was absolutely necessary to explain to the pope directly and to inform him about what happened, given the gravity of the incident. So I see the call as a positive gesture," he said.

He emphasized, however, that "real results of the promised investigation must be made known," and the investigation should "be carried out seriously."

"After so many words, we finally need to see actions. I truly hope that what the prime minister said can become a reality as soon as possible, because the situation in Gaza is truly unbearable," Parolin told RAI.

Parolin added that the Israel-Hamas war "is a war without limits, based on what we've seen."

He asked: "How can a population like that of Gaza be destroyed and starved like this? Many boundaries have already been crossed."

"We've been comforted by the closeness of the church, as always," Romanelli said. He referenced the call Pope Leo made to Pizzaballa on July 18 as he was entering Gaza.

About 600 Christians shelter in the premises of the Holy Family Parish. "We've lost so much, we've suffered so much, and we continue to suffer. We offer it all in the name of the Lord," Romanelli said.

Romanelli described the prayers at the funeral Mass for three Christians, who were Greek Orthodox, on July 17: "We said the prayer of our Lord Jesus: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' May the Lord truly forgive, not only them, but also us, forgive the whole world. For the Lord's forgiveness is the source of grace, peace, and reconciliation."

Read this next: Holy Family shelling strikes symbolic and humanitarian nerve