News



Smoke rises to the sky following an Israeli army airstrike in Khan Younis, in the Gaza Strip, Aug. 18, 2025, the day Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, pastor of Holy Family Church in Gaza, received an evacuation order. (AP photo/Mariam Dagga)



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An evacuation order has been issued for the Gaza City neighborhood that is home to the area's only Catholic church, the parish priest Fr. Gabriel Romanelli told media agencies, as some anticipate an expanded Israeli military offensive.

Romanelli, pastor of Holy Family Church, described the worsening conditions inside the Gaza Strip, marked by shortages, bombardments, and forced displacement, according to Italian news agencies ANSA and SIR.

"Life here is very, very difficult," Romanelli told ANSA. "An order has been issued to evacuate the entire neighborhood. And they said they are starting to distribute tents. One might think that this is good news, 'how wonderful,' but this is in preparation for the evacuation of the entire city of Gaza. But where can all the inhabitants of the Strip, 2,300,000 people ... find space?"



Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, pastor of the only Catholic church in Gaza, celebrates Mass on Aug. 18, the day he received an evacuation order by the Israeli Defense Forces. (Courtesy of Fr. Gabriel Romanelli)

The Israeli military has said the relocations are intended to protect civilians. Humanitarian agencies warn the moves risk aggravating an already severe crisis.

The Associated Press reported that "frustration is growing in Israel over plans for a new military offensive in some of Gaza's most populated areas. Many Israelis fear that could further endanger the remaining hostages" — 20 of the 50 who remain are believed to be alive, AP said.

Romanelli reported that Masses and services are continuing despite bombardments.

"During yesterday's Mass, we heard a very loud explosion nearby that broke a water tank. Fortunately, nothing happened, only material damage," Romanelli said. "Another Sunday of war."



Catholics at Holy Family Church in Gaza pray the rosary on Aug. 18, the day Fr. Gabriel Romanelli received an evacuation order by the Israeli Defense Forces. (Courtesy of Fr. Gabriel Romanelli)

On July 17, the parish itself was hit by Israeli fire, leaving three dead and 11 wounded. An Israeli Defense Forces investigation concluded that the July 17 strike on the church was caused by an errant mortar round, though the IDF's statement omitted mention of the fatalities.

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem condemned the attack as a grave violation of international law, while Pope Leo XIV and other Catholic church leaders repeatedly renewed urgent calls for a ceasefire. The Gaza parish, which serves as shelter to hundreds of displaced residents, suffered significant damage.

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—Fr. Gabriel Romanelli

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The Franciscan priest, whose plight received international attention when he received nightly calls from Pope Francis until the pontiff died in April, noted that in recent days there have been contradictory signals on the ground.

"An association has distributed some vegetables, tomatoes, and potatoes," he said. "People are happy because they like them and need them." At the same time, he added, orders for evacuation continue.

Speaking to SIR, an Italian news wire financed by the Italian Conference of Catholic Bishops, he said the parish remains under constant threat.



Catholics at Holy Family Church in Gaza pray the rosary on Aug. 18, the day Fr. Gabriel Romanelli received an evacuation order by the Israeli Defense Forces.

(Courtesy of Fr. Gabriel Romanelli)

"Here in the al-Zaitoun area of Gaza City, we hear the bombings," Romanelli said. "Sometimes they hit distant areas, other times the bombs fall nearby with shrapnel reaching inside the parish. So we ask all the displaced people living with us, 450 of them, to go back to their rooms because it is very dangerous."

The pastor described the emergency routine for bombings.

"In these cases, we interrupt the activities for children and young people that we organize in our courtyard."

The humanitarian toll continues to mount. Gaza's Health Ministry, run by Hamas, reported five deaths from malnutrition in the past 24 hours, including two children. Since the start of hostilities in October 2023, 263 people, among them 112 children, have died of hunger.

Al Jazeera reported at least 30 killed in Israeli strikes today (Aug. 18), including 14 who were seeking humanitarian aid.

Romanelli said assistance is not keeping pace with needs. "Aid is coming in, but not in sufficient quantities to meet the needs of the population. What is completely lacking are medical supplies," he told SIR.

He added that "the most serious thing is that the population sees no improvement in their conditions. We are all very tired."



Catholics at Holy Family Church in Gaza pray the rosary on Aug. 18, the day Fr. Gabriel Romanelli received an evacuation order by the Israeli Defense Forces. (Courtesy of Fr. Gabriel Romanelli)

Soaring temperatures have made the situation worse.

"These are hot days in every sense, with temperatures reaching 122°F. The heat is terrible and makes sick and elderly people even more vulnerable. There are several in our parish," Romanelli said.

On the broader conflict, he pointed to a lack of progress.

"There is no agreement, they do not want to release the hostages, or only partially, the other side says 'no, all together'... the only thing that is certain is that the bombs continue to cause deaths, civilians, children, the numbers are terrible," he told ANSA.

According to the Hamas-run Health Ministry via AP, the Palestinian death toll since Oct. 7, 2023, stands at just over 62,000, and the ministry says about half the dead are women and children. More than 154,000 have been injured. Israeli authorities report 454 soldiers killed and over 2,840 wounded since the ground offensive began.

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Romanelli said a ceasefire is urgently needed.

"With the hope that clear and good news will soon arrive for a ceasefire, a truce, for the end of the conflict with the release of all hostages and prisoners. In addition, it is absolutely urgent that aid, food, water, fuel, and medicine reach the population," he told SIR.

He also linked Gaza to the wider question of peace in the region.

"Every day, we pray to the Lord and invoke the intercession of Our Lady to obtain the gift of peace for this part of the Holy Land that is Gaza. It would be good for everyone, for Gaza, for Palestine, for Israel, and for the whole world," he said.

"Because, as St. John Paul II reminded us, if they want peace throughout the world, they must begin with peace in Jerusalem. Without peace in Jerusalem, there will never be peace in the world. Today, Gaza has a central role to play in promoting world peace."

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