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French Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline of Marseille, who is president of the French bishops' conference, speaks at a news conference at the Latin Patriarchate headquarters in Jerusalem Aug, 19, 2025, during his visit to the Holy Land. (OSV News/Debbie Hill)



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Jerusalem — August 21, 2025

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Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline of Marseille, France, said his visit to the Holy Land was intended as a gesture of solidarity with the local Christian community and a demonstration of support for "all the friends of peace."

The visit was his first action after assuming the presidency of the French bishops' conference on July 1.

"We know that there are friends here, on all sides," the cardinal said at an Aug. 19 Jerusalem press conference accompanied by Bishop Benoit Bertrand of Pontoise and Archbishop Vincent Jordy of Tours, both vice presidents of the conference. In a press release prior to their visit, the French bishops recognized the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza and the need for the release of the Israeli hostages.

"In our heads, in our hearts, in our prayers, we felt that it is the same for everyone. It's hard to live here. It's even harder to live here knowing what's happening in Gaza, which is nearby. So, we have it in our heads, we have it in our hearts, we feel how much this situation weighs on us," said Aveline at the concluding press conference of their Aug. 16-20 visit.

Church sources confirmed to OSV News that the churches in Gaza are OK, although fighting has intensified all around them as Israel continues to expand its military campaign and Hamas continues to hold 50 people hostage, 20 of whom are believed to still be alive.

"The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem is closely monitoring the rapidly evolving situation in Gaza City, particularly in light of recent decisions and the ongoing mobilization towards an imminent invasion," the Latin Patriarchate said in an Aug. 20 statement obtained by OSV News.

"Reports received from our parish of the Holy Family indicate that several quarters in the vicinity of the compound have now been served with evacuation orders," it said. "Our people on the ground testify that the sound and impact of bombardments are drawing dangerously close to the parish compound itself."

According to local reports, two heavy explosions were heard right next to Holy Family Church the morning of Aug. 19, and displaced people nearby have moved their tents.

Nevertheless, Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, Gaza Holy Family Parish priest, told Vatican News that there has not been an evacuation order of the parish's area of the neighborhood, which is in the Old City of Gaza in the larger neighborhood of Zeitoun.

Aveline said that in a phone conversation with Romanelli, the Argentine-born priest told him the situation was "even more uncertain" but did not give further details.

"That's part of this poverty that we all find ourselves in: uncertainty," Aveline said. "But what struck me was, in spite of that, the inner strength of this man and his confidence, whatever happens."

Aveline also expressed admiration for the Latin patriarch, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, and his "patience and courage" and "will to tell the truth without ever allowing any expression of truth to harm the dignity of a person."

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Aveline said they heard a lot of "sadness, a lot of desolation, a lot of worry, a lot of anguish" from people they met.

The French delegation visited the West Bank Christian village of Taybeh, where extremist Israeli settlers have become increasingly more violent against the village, meeting with the priests of the Latin and Melkite Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches. They also made a pilgrimage to Bethlehem where they sadly noted the almost complete absence of pilgrims.

"We're not here to talk. Above all we came to listen," said Aveline. "We are here to listen, to try to understand what is happening, to better understand the issues, to understand the situation."

They will bring back their reflections and what they learned to the French and other European churches, he said.

The prelates urged a gradual return of pilgrims as the situation allows it, not only because the pilgrim experience can profoundly impact a person's faith as a living part of their history, but because it also would have a vital impact on the local economy, allowing families to remain in the Holy Land.

There is a need for a "new type of pilgrimage" and pilgrims "who understand that there are Christians in this country who can never make the pilgrimage he is making because they cannot have the permit to go from one area to another," said Aveline.

"We want a pilgrim who is there to improve the personal comfort of his faith and who is also there to live a deep ecclesial solidarity. And this ecclesial solidarity does not stop at the borders of the church, it goes with the entire population here," he said.

Sadly, Jordy added, both physical and mental walls have been built which separate people, increasing the "otherness" of one another.

"The other becomes worrying. The other becomes someone you don't know anymore. The other becomes a kind of an embrace of fear and this is also what creates the bed for a certain violence and a certain radicalization, which is a constant risk," Jordy said, emphasizing the importance of "taking a real interest" and having sources of information that help "to dig deeper" into the issues.

While there are other countries with historical links to France, such as Senegal, Congo and Haiti, where people are "suffering terribly" — the church holds a unique responsibility toward the Mother Church of Jerusalem, given its historical significance, Aveline said, and the situation must be viewed through both a political and spiritual lens.

In addition, the deep and unbreakable bond between the Christian and Jewish faiths must be carefully navigated amid today's complex political realities, he said.

"There are many dreams that have collapsed, a lot of rubble, but God knows how to make masterpieces out of the rubble of our dreams," Aveline said, quoting Fr. André Louf, a Belgian monk and theologian.

"This is hope, and this is what we want to share here," the cardinal said. "When all reasons for hope disappear, there remains in the hearts of those who believe in Christ the hope of his resurrection."