Vatican
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Fr. Gabriel Romanelli teaches the Western alphabet to children from Holy Family Parish in Gaza City after daily Mass in May 2025. Holy Family is the only Catholic church in the Gaza Strip. The late Pope Francis had called the church nightly since Oct. 7, 2023. (Courtesy of Gabriel Romanelli)

by Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service

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Vatican City — September 16, 2025
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Just a few hours after Israel launched a major new ground offensive in Gaza City, Pope Leo XIV called the pastor of the city's only Latin-rite parish to express his concern, his prayers and his closeness, the Vatican press office said.

Leo, who was spending the day at Castel Gandolfo, spoke Sept. 16 with Argentine Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, a member of the Institute of the Incarnate Word and pastor of Holy Family Parish in Gaza City.

Romanelli told the pope that Israeli troops and tanks had not reached the area where the church compound is located, the press office said. But the sound of artillery fire could be heard from the parish.

While the Israeli military has been warning civilians to evacuate Gaza City, Romanelli told the pope that about 450 people are being sheltered in the parish compound, and the parish continues to assist them and other people in the neighborhood with food, water and medicine.

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The parish oratory continues operating, leading people in prayer and organizing activities for children, the press office said. Special assistance to the sick and elderly also continues.

Posting on X at 6 a.m. Sept. 16, Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz wrote, "Gaza is burning. The IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) is striking terrorist infrastructure with an iron fist, and IDF soldiers are fighting bravely to create the conditions for the release of the hostages and the defeat of Hamas. We will not relent and we will not go back — until the mission is complete."

Romanelli posted on X a quote from St. John Bosco: "Trusting in Mary brings unshakable comfort and hope."