News

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa greets children as he visits the compound of Gaza City's Holy

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, greets children as he visits the compound of Gaza City's Holy Family Parish during his Christmas pastoral visit Dec. 19. Holy Family is the only Catholic church in Gaza City, and it has sheltered Muslims and Christians since the Israel-Hamas war began in October 2023. (OSV News/Courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)



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In a sign of closeness as Christmas approaches, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, accompanied by the Latin Patriarchal Vicar Bishop William Shomali and a small delegation, arrived in Gaza Dec. 19 for a pastoral visit to the Holy Family Parish.

During his visit, he "will review the current situation of the parish, including the humanitarian response, ongoing relief and rehabilitation efforts, and the prospects for the period ahead," the Latin Patriarchate said in a Dec. 19 statement.

Meeting with the local clergy — led by steadfast pastor Argentine Fr. Gabriel Romanelli — and parishioners, he is there to "receive briefings on the needs of the community and the initiatives underway to support them," the patriarchate said.

Fr. Gabriel Romanelli

Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, pastor of Gaza City's Holy Family Parish, speaks as Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, visits the church compound Dec. 19. (OSV News/Courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)

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Greeting parishioners who have sheltered in the premises of Holy Family, the only Catholic church in Gaza City, since the start of the war in October 2023, Pizzaballa said, "First of all, I greet all of you, happy to be once again among all of you," adding that for the first time since the start of the war he felt "a little bit of relief."

"I know the situation is difficult," he said, but emphasized he brings the greetings not just from Jerusalem, "but from all over the world ... you cannot imagine how many churches, how many groups, associations, people from all over the world — are united with you at this moment."

He said the Holy Family community showed during the war "what does it mean to remain ... strong in faith during this terrible period."

"We cannot forget what happened ... But now we have to look forward," the patriarch said, promising the community: "We will rebuild. We will rebuild our schools. We (will) rebuild our houses ... our life. We are rooted here and we remain here. We want to be here."

He said: "Every time I come here also during the war, there is one baptism to do. So there is no Christmas without baptism. It is wonderful, the best way to say that we believe in life and Jesus."

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa looks at a Nativity and Christmas tree inside Gaza City's Holy

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, looks at a Nativity and Christmas tree inside Gaza City's Holy Family Church during his Christmas pastoral visit Dec. 19. (OSV News/Courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)

On Sunday, Dec. 21, Pizzaballa will preside over the Christmas Mass at the Holy Family Parish.

"This visit marks the beginning of the Christmas celebrations among a community that has lived and continues to live through dark and challenging times," the Dec. 15 statement said.

Despite the ceasefire's first phase agreement to end hostilities, Israel has continued targeted attacks in Gaza, including the recent killing of a Hamas senior commander. According to Al-Jazeera, Israel has carried out at least 800 attacks and killed 400 people since the ceasefire began Oct. 10.

In a recent update, Ramiz Alakbarov, the United Nations' Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, warned that despite U.N. efforts to distribute tents, blankets and provisions for the cold winter months ahead, continued restrictions on humanitarian corridors are hampering those efforts.

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The Dec. 19-21 visit of the patriarch "reaffirms the enduring bond of the Holy Family Parish in Gaza with the wider Diocese of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and expresses the patriarchate's commitment to accompany its faithful in hope, solidarity, and prayer."

"May the birth of Jesus bring the new birth in our life," said Pizzaballa, who will stay in Gaza City until Dec. 21.

Judith Sudilovsky, who writes for OSV News from Jerusalem, contributed to this report.

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