



Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, center in vestments with red stripe, poses in a group photo with parishioners of the Holy Family Parish in Gaza City May 16, 2024. It was the first visit of the Latin patriarch to the Gaza Strip since the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel amid the ongoing war. Next to the cardinal is Fra' Alessandro de Franciscis, left, grand hospitaller of the Order of Malta, who was visiting the Holy Land, and Father Youssef Asaad, right, an assistant priest in the only Catholic parish in Gaza City. (OSV News/Courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)



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Jerusalem May 17, 2024

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In a previously unpublicized visit, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, entered the Gaza Strip May 16, reaching Holy Family Parish for his first pastoral visit since the outbreak of Israel-Hamas war following the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel.

Holy Family Parish priest Father Gabriel Romanelli, who was caught in Jerusalem at the outbreak of war and unable to return to his parish for the past eight months, also accompanied the patriarch and will be remaining in Gaza City with his community.

"It was a long time I wanted, desired, to be with them, to meet them," Pizzaballa said of his visit to the resilient parish. "Now I had this possibility and am very happy," he said in a video message posted online by the patriarchate May 16.

Also in the small delegation was Fra' Alessandro de Franciscis, grand hospitaller of the Sovereign Order of Malta.

According to a short press release put out by the Latin Patriarchate, the delegation met the population to "encourage them and to deliver a message of hope, solidarity and support."

Pizzaballa said that first of all he wanted "to be with them, to embrace them, to hug them and to support them as much as we can and to verify their conditions and to

see what we can do in order to improve their conditions and to help them in (any) way possible."

The patriarch said Mass for the parish community and also paid a courtesy visit to the nearby St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church. Pizzaballa met with Greek Orthodox Archbishop Alexios of Tiberias of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, who refused to leave the Gaza Strip despite war danger.

Along with Alexios, Pizzaballa walked through the neighborhood surrounding the church, visibly ruined by bomb strikes, and prayed at St. Porphyrios, believed to be the third oldest church in the world.

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On Oct. 19, 2023, an explosion at the St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church campus in Gaza City left the administration building in ruins, and 17 people dead.

Several hundred people had been sheltering at the church complex, many of them sleeping, when the explosion went off at night.

According to the press statement, the visit also marked the first stage of a joint humanitarian mission of the Latin Patriarchate and the Sovereign Order of Malta, in collaboration with Malteser International and other partners, with the aim to deliver much-needed food and medical supplies to the people in Gaza.

The patriarch was scheduled to return to Jerusalem May 17, depending on the security situation and the risk assessment.

"We need your prayer and we need all the Christian community to be united in prayer with our Christian community of Gaza. Thank you for your understanding," Pizzaballa said in a video message.

The Hamas assault on Israel Oct. 7, left 1,200 mostly civilians murdered and 254 people taken captive into Gaza, according to Israel, while the subsequent Israeli military campaign into Gaza has killed more than 35,000 Palestinians, mostly children and women according to the Hamas Gaza Ministry of Health, which does not differentiate between Hamas members and civilians.

At the beginning of the war, almost 800 people were sheltering in the Gaza Catholic parish, with 500 people still living in the premises of the church. Another 200 are sheltering in the Greek Orthodox church.

The situation in Gaza is increasingly desperate, with humanitarian organizations such as Caritas urging that people are starving, unable to find, let alone buy food.