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A wounded Palestinian Christian woman is brought into Al-Ahli Arab Baptist Hospital after an apparent Israeli tank attack on the church of the Holy Family Parish — the only Catholic parish in the Gaza Strip, in Gaza City July 17. (OSV News/Reuters/Dawoud Abu Alkas)

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The only Catholic Church in Gaza, which Pope Francis called nightly since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, was hit by an Israeli shell this morning (July 17), killing three people and injuring 10 others, including the parish priest.

Most of the Catholics who were praying in the church at the moment of the attack had minor injuries, according to news reports.

The shelling of the Holy Family Catholic Church in Gaza damaged the church compound, where hundreds of Palestinians have been sheltering from the war.

On Friday (June 18), Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Pope Leo XIV at his residence in Castel Gandolfo and the pontiff asked the Israeli leader to agree to a ceasefire and urged an end to the war, according to the Holy See Press Office.

"He reiterated his concern for the dramatic humanitarian situation of the population in Gaza, whose heartbreaking price is paid in particular by children, the elderly, and the sick," the Vatican press office said. "Finally, the Holy Father reiterated the urgency of protecting places of worship and, above all, the faithful and all people in Palestine and Israel."

The parish priest, Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, had a minor leg injury. Romanelli spoke to Pope Francis every night from Oct. 8, 2023, until the pope died April 21.

Despite his injury, Romanelli was shown placing his hand on the forehead of an injured man being carried out on a stretcher in a video broadcast by the Al-Arabiya TV station. He was accompanied by two men — one of whom was holding a bandage to the side of his face.

Romanelli was also transferred to the Al-Ahli Arab hospital for treatment and released, according to Reuters.

The parish priest spoke briefly with the National Catholic Reporter after the attack, but was too busy to answer questions.

The Catholic charity Caritas Jerusalem said the parish's 60-year-old janitor and an 84-year-old woman receiving psychosocial support at the church were confirmed dead.

Two Orthodox Christians were killed and will be buried in St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza City later on July 17.

**[Read this next: Pope Francis called this pastor in Gaza every day since the war began](#)**

In a telegram to Latin Patriarch Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa following the attack, Pope Leo XIV said he was "deeply saddened" about the news, and conveyed his spiritual closeness and offered prayers for the victims.

"I commend the souls of the deceased to the loving mercy of Almighty God," he said. He also prayed "for the consolation of those who grieve and for the recovery of the injured."

Leo also renewed his urgent call for an immediate ceasefire, emphasizing the pressing need for peace. "I express my profound hope for dialogue, reconciliation and enduring peace in the region," he wrote.

"What we know for sure is that a tank, the IDF says by mistake, but we are not sure about this, they hit the church directly, the Church of the Holy Family, the Latin Church," [Pizzaballa told Vatican News](#), without specifying the source of the information.

"We need to understand what has happened and what needs to be done, above all to protect our people," Pizzaballa said. "Naturally, we must try to ensure that these things do not happen again, and then we will see how to proceed, but we will certainly never leave them alone."

In a statement, Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and archbishop for the U.S. military services, [echoed the pope's prayers and called for "dialogue and an immediate ceasefire" in Gaza](#).

The church compound was sheltering both Christians and Muslims, including a number of children with disabilities, according to Fadel Naem, acting director of Al-

Ahli Hospital, which received the fatalities and people injured.



Parish priest of the Holy Family Parish, Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, receives medical attention, after he suffered light leg injuries following what initial reports said was an Israeli tank attack on the church, according to initial reports, at Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City, in this still image taken from a video July 17, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Dawoud Abu Alkas)

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem confirmed the injuries and damage to the church in a brief morning statement. "The Holy Family Church in Gaza has been struck by a raid this morning," the first July 17 statement said.

In a later statement, the patriarchate expressed its "deepest condemnation" of the attack, saying it was a "flagrant violation of human dignity and a blatant violation of the sanctity of life and the sanctity of religious sites, which are supposed to provide a safe haven in times of war."



The statement emphasized that the bombing had destroyed large parts of the complex, forcing those with special medical needs to evacuate the area, some without the respirators they need to survive, endangering their lives.

"At this critical moment, the Patriarchate affirms that churches are spiritual and humanitarian beacons, serving everyone without discrimination," the statement said. "It also calls on the international community and United Nations agencies to provide urgent protection for religious institutions and humanitarian centers in the Gaza Strip and to ensure respect for international humanitarian law, which criminalizes the targeting of civilians and places of worship."

The Israeli military said it was aware of the damage caused at the church and is investigating. The Israeli military said it "makes every feasible effort to mitigate harm to civilians and civilian structures, including religious sites, and regrets any damage caused to them." Israel accuses Hamas militants of operating from civilian areas.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry — in a rare move — posted an apology on social media. "Israel expresses deep sorrow over the damage to the Holy Family Church in Gaza City and over any civilian casualty," the ministry said.

### **Hundreds of people sheltered at the church**

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Photos show part of the church's roof next to the cross blown away by the tank fire with burned marks down the wall, and windows shattered.

"The explosion occurred near the cross on the church roof, scattering shrapnel and debris across the yard," said Caritas Jerusalem in a statement, adding that the church was "struck by a shell."

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Two elderly women had been sitting inside the Caritas psychosocial support tent when they were injured, the statement said. Three young people standing at the entrance of the church were also seriously injured, according to the statement.

The statement said Romanelli had been urging people to stay inside their rooms over the past week as the fighting in the area intensified.

"If Father Gabriel hadn't warned us to stay indoors, we could have lost 50 to 60 people today. It would have been a massacre," the statement quoted one of "our Caritas colleagues."

"Yesterday, the threat became especially severe due to the presence of Israeli tanks near the church compound and continuous strikes in close proximity," said the statement.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni condemned the Israeli strike and said it was "unacceptable."

Prior to the July 17 attack, the parish priest of the Gaza Strip's small Christian community said in a recent Vatican News interview that his flock was already exhausted by war and a severe lack of food.

Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni blamed Israel for the strike on the church. "The attacks on the civilian population that Israel has been demonstrating for months are unacceptable. No military action can justify such an attitude," she said.

The church is just a stone's throw from Al-Ahli Hospital, Naem said, noting that the area around both the church and the hospital has been repeatedly struck for over a week.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which also has a church in Gaza that previously sustained damage from Israeli strikes, said the building suffered significant damage.

Targeting a holy site "is a blatant affront to human dignity and a grave violation of the sanctity of life and the inviolability of religious sites, which are meant to serve as

safe havens during times of war," the church said in a statement.

Separately, another person was killed and 17 injured July 17 in a strike against two schools sheltering displaced people in the Al-Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza, according to Al-Awda Hospital. The Israeli military did not immediately comment on the strike.

Last year, Pope Francis told CBS' "60 Minutes" that he calls a priest daily at 7 p.m. at the Holy Family Church to hear what was happening to the nearly 600 people sheltering at the facility.

Even now, each evening the parish marks what they call "the pope's hour." At 8 p.m. local time, the church bells ring out — a solemn echo across a city hollowed by war.

"It was really a very emotional and strong moment, but also comforting, because we all saw his departure on Easter Monday as a sign of divine benevolence," [Romanelli said in a May interview with NCR](#) on Whatsapp. "It is a gesture we make to continue to feel his presence and the presence of the church."

Only 1,000 Christians live in Gaza, an overwhelmingly Muslim territory, according to the U.S. State Department's international religious freedom report for 2024. The report says the majority of Palestinian Christians are Greek Orthodox but they also include other Christians, including Roman Catholics.

### **Ceasefire negotiations continuing**

The strikes come as Israel and Hamas continue talks for a ceasefire in Gaza, though little progress has been made.

The war began with Hamas' cross-border attack on Oct. 7, 2023. Militants killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted 251 people, most of whom have since been released in ceasefire agreements or other deals.

Fifty hostages are still being held, less than half of them believed to be alive.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed over 58,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which has said women and children make up more than half of the dead. It does not distinguish between civilians and militants in its tally.

National Catholic Reporter's Camillo Barone, the Associated Press and OSV News contributed to this report.

*Editor's note: This story has been updated to include Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's call to Pope Leo XIV.*

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