

## Gaza Strip. Sister Saleh: “A growing number of Christians want to emigrate”

“Today let us thank God that there is finally a truce between Israel and Palestine, and some hostages have been freed. Let us pray that they will all be freed as soon as possible – think of their families! -, that more humanitarian aid will enter Gaza, and that dialogue is insisted upon: it is the only way, the only way to achieve peace. Those do not want dialogue do not want peace.”



told SIR. **The desire to emigrate.** “During these days of ceasefire, our Christians went out of the parish for the first time since the outbreak of the war,” says the nun, who lives with 700 displaced people in the premises of the Latin parish in Gaza. “They were finally able to go back to their homes and check on their condition. Unfortunately, all their homes had been shelled and destroyed. For this reason - she says - many are planning to emigrate. This war is undermining their resolve to stay in Gaza and many have already decided to emigrate. Australia is one of the most popular destinations.” This choice is partly due to the Australian government's recent announcement that it will issue more than 800 visas to Palestinians and more than 1,700 to Israeli citizens between 7 October and 20 November. These visas are tourist visas, issued after thorough security checks, and allow temporary entry for up to 12 months. Australia had made a similar decision for 3,000 tourist visas for Ukrainian citizens (between 23 February and 11 March 2022) after the Russian invasion, and for 5,000 Afghans (between 18 August and 20 September 2021) after the US withdrawal from the country and the Taliban's return to power. “If the war does not end immediately,” stresses Sister Saleh, “there is a very real risk that Gaza will be left without its dwindling Christian community (just over 1,000 believers, *Ed.'s note*), which would be a serious loss for the whole Strip.” **Last day of the truce.** The truce between Israel and Hamas entered its final 24 hours on Monday 27 November. Sister Saleh said: “Thousands of Gazans are still trying to return to their homes to collect personal belongings, but above all to find some food, water, gas and fuel,” as some 350 vehicles carrying humanitarian aid have entered the Strip through the Rafah crossing since last Friday. These numbers, she said, “are not enough to meet the needs of the population, which is exhausted by the war. “Moreover, not everyone will have access,” she points out, “because there are so-called 'red' areas, which are under the control of Israeli tanks and prevent access to everyone.” **Christmas without lights.** In the midst of such destruction, the nun adds, “it is very difficult to be joyful for the coming Christmas. There are no Christmas lights or Nativity scenes. We will only celebrate it in church with Holy Mass,” in accordance with the request of the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches of Jerusalem on 10 November for clergy and faithful to “forgo all unnecessarily festive activities and symbols and to focus more on the spiritual meaning of Christmas, with all the focus directed at holding in our thoughts our brothers and sisters affected by this war and its consequences, and with fervent prayers for a just and lasting peace for our beloved Holy Land.” The community of the evacuated parishioners is preparing to live the season of Advent with a single prayer: “the gift of peace and justice”. “We will celebrate Christmas together in the parish,” says Sister Nabila, knowing that “given the present circumstances” there will be no visit from the Patriarch, nor Christmas visas from Israel for Christians from the Strip who need to travel to Jerusalem and Bethlehem to pray and visit family members. The Christian community of Gaza can only rely on the news coming from the deserted and unlit Bethlehem, where, on Saturday 2 December, the eve of Advent, the Custos of the Holy Land, Mgr Francesco Patton, will arrive surrounded by silence. On 24 December, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Card. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, will celebrate the traditional midnight Mass in the presence of diplomatic dignitaries including, if nothing changes, the President of the Palestinian Authority, Abu Mazen.

