
Patriarch Pizzaballa in Gaza. Father Romanelli (parish priest): “His visit is a great gift and a source of comfort”

“It was a great gift for us, a source of comfort for those who have had to endure months of hardship and suffering. The Church is indeed one large family in which everyone, big and small, works for the glory of Christ and for peace.” Contacted by SIR, Father Gabriel Romanelli, parish priest of the Holy Family Catholic church in Gaza, describes the four-day visit to his parish of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Card. Pierbattista Pizzaballa. The Patriarch had repeatedly expressed his desire to visit Gaza to show solidarity and closeness to Gazan Christians. This wish was fulfilled on 16 May. This is his first visit since war broke out on 7 October.



The Patriarch's arrival in Gaza coincided with the reunification of the faithful with Father Romanelli, who had been outside the Strip and unable to return since the outbreak of the war. On Thursday he was finally able to reunite with his parishioners together with the Sisters of the Incarnate Word (IVE) and with his vicar, Father Youssef Asaad, who said he would remain in Gaza despite the difficult months he faced in the parish compound with some 700 displaced Christians, now down to about 500. Father Gabriel said: “I have returned and I will remain with them. The IVE Provincial, Father Carlos Ferrero, and a third Incarnate Word nun, Sister Mary of Jesus, also from Argentina, will be staying with us for some time. There is a lot of work to be done here and we are in need of help.” During his visit to Gaza, Card. Pizzaballa met with the members of the displaced Christian community, spoke with the faithful, visited some of the damaged parish buildings, visited the children playing, celebrated Mass and presided at Rosary prayers and vigils, blessed a bakery which has been rebuilt with the help of the Latin Patriarchate, and paid a visit to the Greek Orthodox parish of St Porphyrios, where he had the opportunity to greet the Archbishop of Gaza, Alexios of Tiberias, and the parish priest, Fr Silas Habib. **Father Romanelli, what were your feelings when you rejoined the faithful of your parish, and how were they?** In their faces I saw much pain, but also great serenity. I will quote the words of the Patriarch, which perfectly capture their mood: “I was amazed by their serenity. In spite of the enormous suffering caused by this interminable war, they feel no anger”, he said. I also saw widespread destruction. There is hardly a building that has not been hit by a bomb, or has not been damaged or destroyed. It will take years to rebuild Gaza. But the people want to go on with their lives, they want to rebuild.” **Are you concerned about the future of Christians in Gaza?** Any decision made by the families will be respected by the Church. Some want to leave and are preparing to do so. They are applying for visas, while others are planning to stay. There are currently around 500 displaced Christians in the compound, including around 50 children in the care of Mother Teresa's nuns.

Those who choose to remain can rely, as always, on the support of the Church. It is our commitment.

How will this happen? We plan to resume the children's classes very soon. However, it is not a 'school' in the strict sense of the term, because we are in a state of war and many of our buildings have been hit and are no longer operational. In spite of this, we are making every effort to provide this opportunity for our youngest children. We have reopened the oratory in the parish with activities,

games, clowns and gatherings. This is a great sign of hope for the children and their families. **In the past eight months of war, the Christians of Gaza have experienced significant loss, with 36 dead and several wounded. However, they have also been able to experience the material and spiritual closeness of Pope Francis...** Indeed, he has been a like a father to them, calling his children in distress every day. Each evening at 8pm, members of the community gather around Father Youssef, waiting to hear the voice of the Pontiff and to receive his blessing. This has occurred again in the past few days. It is a touching gesture that strengthens the faith of our Christians. Sister Maria Pilar, one of our sisters in Gaza, expressed it perfectly:

“The Pope is one of us, he belongs to our community.”

This is true with regard to parish life. As far as you have managed to see in these first few days, what is life like outside? There are no soldiers in the al-Zeitoun neighbourhood, where we are located; however, the streets are lined with vehicles riddled with bullets. Despite the surrounding rubble and the ongoing conflict, the local population displays an admirable resilience and capacity to endure suffering. In the past two days, I was impressed by the commitment of numerous Gazawis who are attempting to preserve what little remains of their homes, selling a variety of items to earn a living, and seeking a secure shelter where they can sleep with their families. It should be remembered that the conflict is still ongoing, with tens of thousands of people wandering the streets with nowhere to go.



To the best of our knowledge, the situation has improved slightly. Some bakeries have been authorised to reopen, so there is more bread available. Unfortunately, the cost of many products is high and few can afford to pay. **Are you expecting an agreement for a truce or ceasefire and the release of the hostages?** We have been praying for peace every day since the war began. A ceasefire is necessary. But it is not the solution. The solution is peace. I remain convinced that in wars, including this one, the rumble and violence of the weapons never has the final say. Let us pray tirelessly for peace.

Marco Calvarese