
Gaza Strip: amidst pandemic and conflict, Father Romanelli (parish priest), “we are used to being enclosed, so we still manage to smile.”

“Gaza is regarded as a vast open-air prison, where movement is virtually impossible. However, paradoxically, today the whole world is a prison due to the Covid-19. Gazawis are enduring this closure better than others because they are used to living in isolation. perhaps that's also why we still manage to smile here in Gaza”: The small Christian community of the Strip - 1,000 faithful, 130 of whom are Catholics, "plus 2 more about to arrive" - is going through a difficult period marked by the Covid-19 pandemic. The parish priest of the Holy Family Latin-rite Church, Father Gabriel Romanelli, described to SIR the situation on the ground during a rare moment of rest from the summer activities. “God is saving Gaza from the pandemic. Reported cases only involve people coming from out of Gaza, those infected are quarantined in dedicated facilities on the border with Egypt and Israel.” As of 22 July, according to WHO data, there were 75 cases of Covid, 68 people admitted to hospital and 1 death in the Strip. People gradually start to flood streets; markets and shops have reopened, as have churches and mosques. But the socio-economic and health situation remains critical.

Coronavirus and conflict. "The Coronavirus - added the parish priest - has aggravated the economic and health conditions that were already disastrous due to a never-ending conflict. Tension is unrelenting. More people are now unemployed and foreign aids have ceased to arrive. Schools are due to reopen the first week of August, but at the moment there is no confirmation. In the meantime, however, the local authorities have given us official permission to organize recreational activities, albeit with some restrictions. For example, the scout group has promoted a series of activities but only for a limited group of members. Everything is done in full compliance with sanitary requirements.” **A vibrant parish.** In the months of May, June and July the parish created a task force of animators, led by Father Romanelli with his confreres and Sisters. They transformed the parish complex into a vast playground and a meeting and leisure area. "We prepared catechesis, meetings, sports tournaments, moments of prayer, cultural and recreational activities, addressed to families, young people, children" said the parish priest. But there is a special new initiative: “the **school of ministrants dedicated to the Venerable Servant of God 'Carlo Acutis'**, indicated by Pope Francis as a model of youthful holiness- the priest explained - whose beatification will take place on October 10th. We have a group of twenty children and young people of various age groups so far. This is a significant number when compared to the small local Christian community active in the midst of two million Muslims. The school - he said - provides basic courses in liturgy and catechesis essential for the full comprehension of the Holy Mass service, so as to serve in full understanding of the entrusted task. Charity initiatives are also being planned. Not only altar service but also service to others, to the poor.” During the past few months several groups of adult faithful attended meetings and social gatherings, both online and 'in person', and organized various initiatives to help the local community. **A breath of fresh air.** “For the Christians of the Strip, these activities are a breath of fresh air after challenging months of pandemic lockdown - said Father Romanelli -.

These initiatives aim to promote hope and not pessimism...

that can easily be felt in moments such as this. **The beautiful thing is to see the happy faces of these young people, of the families while taking part in the activities.** These smiles convey the certainty that we are not alone. It is also a way of instilling hope into those observing us from the outside. And there are many of them.”