
Gaza Strip: in the Holy Family Catholic church it's already Christmas despite COVID-19

"It's already Christmas in Gaza. This year, in the Strip, Jesus was born on the eve of Advent. He didn't wait until the night of December 24. It's breaking news, a scoop, isn't that what you call it, or am I wrong?" Father **Gabriel Romanelli**, parish priest of the Roman Catholic church of the Holy Family, the only Catholic parish in the Strip with only 117 faithful, located in the area of al-Zeitun, the southern neighbourhood that houses also the Orthodox community (about 1000 faithful, ed.'s note), remarked to SIR with a smile. He promptly explained:



Immagine non disponibile

"The decision to set the date of birth of the Child Jesus earlier may seem somewhat creative, but it was dictated by the fear of new restrictions against the COVID-19 pandemic", said the parish priest. "In fact, a partial lockdown was already in place at the end of November. We feared that the situation could deteriorate with the cold weather, causing an increase in the number of infected people, which eventually occurred, so we decided to anticipate the pilgrimage of the Child on the first day of Advent." The facts proved him right: on Monday, November 2, there were 7002 confirmed cases with 34 deaths. On December 16, there were 30,146 infected and 220 dead. These figures are updated by default and based on an average of only 1,500 daily tests. **Controversies over Mass service hours.** In this strip of land inhabited by 2 million people, where a blockade imposed by Israel has been in force for 13 years, with a limited supply of vital medicines, where drinking water is polluted and with an unreliable power supply, "the issue of Christmas Masses, on whether to celebrate Midnight Mass earlier, that caused heated debates in Italy and in countries across Europe, to us seems like something from a distant planet." "Jesus Christ was born over 2000 years ago, the historical event has already taken place - remarked Father Romanelli - At this time of pandemic and lockdown we celebrate however we can, the heart of history is Him, not the time of the celebration." **Christmas dream.** Our Christmas dream was "to celebrate Christmas with the entire faith community, but owing to increased cases of infection, local authorities ruled the closure of schools - except kindergartens and the last year of high school - mosques, churches and other public places. The local curfew is in force from 6.30 pm to 6 am. No one is allowed to go out of the house, so every day, at 4 p.m., our faithful follow the livestreamed Christmas Novena prayer that we celebrate in the church in the presence of men and women religious only. We are only allowed to visit people's homes wearing masks and protective equipment. Thus, while waiting to know if we will be able to celebrate the liturgies of December 24 and 25 and the following ones in church, in presence, we are proceeding with the pilgrimage of the Infant Jesus to the homes of the faithful." Yesterday, after the Mass of the Fourth of Advent, Father Romanelli, his vicar, Father Youssef Asaad, and the men and women religious present blessed the nativity scene and the Christmas tree, broadcasting the event via social networks. **A time of closeness.** The Child is brought to a large number of families in the parish, including Orthodox families. "The visitation occurs as follows: my vicar, with two Sisters of the Incarnate Word, bring the statue of Jesus - the very one we traditionally lay in the parish Nativity scene during midnight Mass - to the families gathered in prayer. The statue is displayed for

eneration by the sick, the elderly, the disabled, and children. The Administration of Holy Communion and the Blessing conclude the liturgical part of the visit that continues with a festive moment and a gift to the family, consisting in an icon of Bethlehem. The statue of the Child Jesus is properly disinfected in between visits. "In past years the Christmas pilgrimage with the Child took place after December 25, while during Advent the Christian families, the sick and the elderly, would receive visits from young people who also brought food parcels. Owing to the pandemic this year we decided to do it earlier and there was great joy among the faithful. Faith and prayer are the cornerstones of our life, inhabited by suffering. Carrying the Infant Jesus within the Eucharistic liturgy expresses the Church's closeness to the faithful today more than ever", said Father Romanelli **The joy of the Birth and the joy of sharing.** Along with the Pilgrimage of the Infant Jesus, the parish organized nativity scene and Christmas tree competitions, as well as a singing 'contest' of Christmas carols. "We ask the families we visit to share everything online," said Father Romanelli. The parish will award prizes to the families with the most beautiful nativity scene and Christmas tree and to the best Christmas carol performance." In addition, "on the afternoon of December 24, at the end of the Solemn Mass live streamed on social media, we will hold an online raffle with all parishioners. The prizes will be delivered to the winners' homes on December 27." A further beacon of hope for the small Christian community of Gaza is the news of an upcoming visit by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, "pandemic conditions permitting." Not such good news comes from Israel which, according to Father Romanelli, "so far has not granted permits to Christians from the Strip to travel to Jerusalem and Bethlehem to pray for Christmas".

Daniele Rocchi