

Israel-Hamas war

Christians huddled in Gaza speak to the Pope every night

Nightly calls from pontiff comfort Palestinians
sheltering in churches for a second Christmas

Heba Saleh 7 HOURS AGO

Every night without fail, a mobile phone rings in the Holy Family church in Gaza, and a parish priest answers. The voice at the end of the line is that of Pope Francis, head of the Catholic Church and spiritual leader to a global flock of 1.4bn people.

For more than a year, the pontiff has made nightly calls to the church to comfort the hundreds of Palestinian Christians sheltering there as fighting rages on the streets outside and Israeli warplanes pound much of the city around them to rubble.

For those living in harsh conditions in the church complex and now preparing for their second Christmas surrounded by war, the regular contact with the pontiff reassures them that they have not been forgotten.

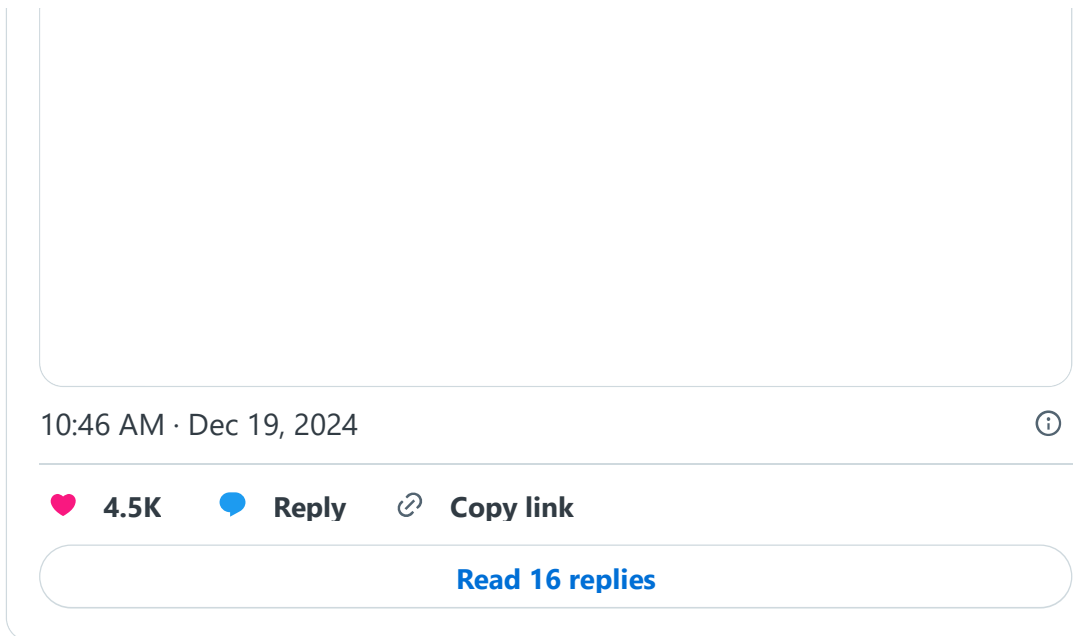
“It calms our fears and makes us feel cared for,” said Attallah Tarazi, a retired surgeon. “The Pope gives us his blessings, and he prays with us if the connection is good.”

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Pope Francis during one of his daily video calls with the church in Gaza.



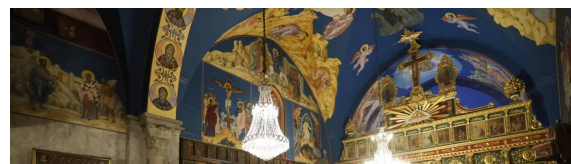
The entire Christian community in Gaza — up to 1,000 people — sought sanctuary in October 2023 in the Catholic Holy Family Church complex and in the nearby Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius, the only two Christian houses of worship in the territory.

The pontiff said of the Gaza conflict in his annual Christmas greetings on Saturday: “Yesterday children have been bombed. This is cruelty; this is not war.” He told CBS’s *Sixty Minutes* programme in May: “I speak every night at seven to the Gaza parish . . . They tell me about what happens there. It’s very tough, very tough . . . Sometimes they go hungry and they tell me things. There is a lot of suffering.”

On December 22, the leader of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, led a Christmas mass in the Holy Family church on a rare outside visit allowed by Israeli authorities into the besieged strip.

Despite the war outside, priests in cassocks regularly conduct mass in the two Gaza churches under domes painted with biblical scenes. Some lessons have also begun in the church complexes for children missing a second year of school after the war triggered by Hamas’s October 7 2023 attack on Israel, in which the Palestinian militant group killed about 1,200 people and seized about 250 hostages.

More than 45,000 Palestinians have been killed by the ferocious offensive that Israel subsequently launched on the Gaza strip.





Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa leads a Christmas Mass in the Holy Family church on December 22 on a rare outside visit allowed by Israeli authorities into the besieged strip © Omar Al-Qattaa/AFP/Getty Images



The Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius. An Israeli air strike destroyed a building sheltering families in the complex, killing 17 people, in October 2023 © IMAGO/APAimages/Reuters

The number of Christians sheltering in the churches has fallen this year because many managed to leave through the Rafah crossing with Egypt, which was open until it was seized by Israel on May 6.

That left about 650 people in the two churches, said George Akroush, an official at the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem. Families sleep on mattresses and survive on tinned food and lentils, with no fresh meat, fruit or vegetables. Aid agencies send supplies, while some humanitarian convoys have been organised by the patriarchate.

“We’re trying to send in warm items because it gets very cold in Gaza,” said Akroush. “We want to give them boots and children’s clothes and thermal wear. There is also a severe shortage of mattresses, but the Israelis refuse to allow them in, even though most people sleep on the floor.”

An Israeli official said on Tuesday that a truckload of aid entered ahead of the cardinal’s visit. “This shipment included mattresses, warm clothing and additional winterisation items, as well as other types of aid chosen by the mission,” they said.

Akroush said the patriarchate had tried to send supplies for between 6,000 and 7,000 people in each of its convoys so aid would also reach Muslim neighbours. “We make no distinction between Christians and Muslims,” he said. “This is the church’s mission.”

Tarazi refused to leave Gaza to join his adult children in Australia: he wanted to see the outcome of the war and still held out hope that his property in the strip could be passed on to his offspring. But he never expected to spend another Christmas in the church.

“I didn’t think we would be here so long, sleeping to the sound of bombing every night,” he said. “Many shells have landed close to the church.”

Built in the 1960s to accommodate Christians among Palestinian refugees forced to flee to Gaza when Israel was founded in 1948, the Catholic church was named after the passage of the Holy Family through the territory during their biblical flight into Egypt.

Its complex includes a convent, a school and several other buildings, one of which housed 73 people with disabilities. Rocket strikes in December 2023 destroyed that building, and its residents moved to another in the compound, where nuns still attend to their care.

Huge areas of Gaza City have been reduced to rubble-filled wastelands by Israeli bombardment, and most residents have fled south on Israeli orders.

The churches' status as houses of worship and the Pope's interest in the welfare of the trapped Christians appear to have conferred some protection. But still sniper

fire, shells and missiles have hit both complexes, and people were killed in the war's early months.

In December 2023, an elderly woman and her daughter were shot dead by sniper fire as they walked inside the Holy Family complex. The Latin Patriarchate accused Israeli troops of carrying out the killings, but the Israeli army denied involvement.

Two months earlier an Israeli air strike destroyed a building sheltering families in the Saint Porphyrius compound, killing 17 people. Israel promised to investigate, but no outcome has been announced.

Attallah al-Amash, an accountant, lost his seven-month-old daughter, Joelle, and his wife's parents in that attack. He then moved his wife and three-year old son, Ibrahim, to the Catholic church.

"I feel that everything is negative, and there is a heavy feeling from the moment we get up to when we go to sleep," said Amash. "We are waiting for [the war] to finish, but it does not."

His little boy plays with other children in the churchyard, but Amash said that he and his wife "have nothing to think about and nothing to do, we just sit there".

The building in Gaza City where the family lived was destroyed in July. Since then they have rarely left the compound. Amash hopes for a future outside the enclave. "If I find a job abroad, I will go," he said. "But now we just have to wait for the war to end."



The Pope told CBS's Sixty Minutes in May: 'I speak every night at seven to the Gaza parish... There is a lot of suffering.' © Guglielmo Mangiapane/Reuters



A priest leads the Easter Sunday Mass at the Catholic Holy Family Church in Gaza City earlier this year © AFP/Getty Images

Samer Tarazi, sheltering in Saint Porphyrius, was preparing to leave for Australia when the Rafah crossing closed. His wife and three children had already travelled, so now the family is separated.

A member of the large Tarazi Christian clan in Gaza, and a cousin of Attallah Tarazi, he leaves Saint Porphyrius to film for his media services company when he judges it safe.

“Outside there is total destruction,” he said. “There isn’t a single undamaged building, or one that has windows. I would say 80 per cent of buildings are now unlivable.”

He too wants to leave Gaza after the war because “Christians are becoming an even smaller minority”.

But Arkoush, of the Latin Patriarchate, said it was too early to write off the future of the Christian community in Gaza. He expects another 150 people to leave after the war, but said many opted to stay when offered the chance to go when the crossing was open.

“They said: ‘This is the land of our forebears and we are not a foreign community.’ I expect the numbers to fall, but for the Christian presence to end — I don’t think so.”

Additional reporting by Neri Zilber in Tel Aviv. Cartography by Aditi Bhandari

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