

HOLY LAND

Patriarch Pizzaballa visits Gaza Christians: "You are the light of Christ"

WORLD

23_12_2024

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He crossed the border between Israel and Gaza by car accompanied by a priest. After meticulous checks, the Israeli military, which guards the crossing day and night, allowed Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, to pass and reach the

Parish of the Holy Family in the heart of Gaza. Priests of the Incarnate Word and a large crowd of Christians gathered in the church to greet him to a long applause. Before and after the Mass, people gathered around him. They did not ask for material help, but for prayers. *"Sayyedna, pray for me"; "Pray for our family"; "In Bethlehem, when you hold the Child Jesus in your hands, ask Him to protect us and put an end to this war"*.

Visibly disturbed and saddened, Cardinal Pizzaballa reflected on what he had seen on the way from the border to the parish: only destruction. Villages reduced to piles of rubble, and among the ruins men and women searching for their loved ones who are still missing, or for any object that might be useful. The Patriarch blessed those present, making the sign of the cross on the foreheads of children and the elderly. He had a word of hope for all: "Everyone wanted to come and be with you, to bring gifts, but we could not bring you much. You have become the light of our Church throughout the world," he said in his homily to deafening silence. Many held the crown in their hands. Their eyes were fixed on the statue of the Mother of God. At Christmas," Pizzaballa said, "we celebrate light and we ask: where is this light? The light is here, in this church.

During his homily, the Cardinal looked at the faces of those present and said: "We live in a time of darkness and there is no need to dwell on it, because you know it well. In these moments we must look first to Jesus, because he gives us the strength to endure this dark time. This past year has taught us that we cannot rely on people. How many promises have been made and not kept? And how much violence and hatred has been caused by people? But we cannot allow hate to enter our hearts. If we want to remain a light, we must give our hearts only to Jesus.

As the Patriarch spoke, the noise of the drones made his voice inaudible: "Don't be afraid! Do not be afraid! We will never abandon you". He continues: "I don't know when or how this war will end, and every time we get closer to the end, it seems like it starts over. But sooner or later the war will end and we must not lose hope. When the hostilities end, we will rebuild everything: our schools, our hospitals and our homes. We must remain united and strong. And quoting a remark made by a parishioner the last time he visited Gaza, when the war had already begun, he continued: 'As Christians, there is no violence in our blood. We want to remain Christians and remain the light in this place. He concluded: Do not be afraid, because no one can take away the light of Christ from us. Continue to give the good witness of the Christian faith".

Pizzaballa arrived in Gaza after a long-distance dispute between Pope Francis and the Israeli embassy accredited to the Holy See. The Pope, who met last Saturday with cardinals, bishops and various Curia staff for the traditional Christmas greetings,

recalled, among other things, all the conflicts scattered around the world. In particular, he referred to the Holy Land, saying: "Yesterday, on 20 December, the Patriarch [of Latin Jerusalem, ed.] was not allowed to enter Gaza, as he had promised, and yesterday children were killed in the bombing. This is cruelty. This is not war. I want to say this because it touches my heart'. There was an immediate reaction from the Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, Yaron Sideman, who declared: 'This is not true. Patriarch Pizzaballa has been authorised to enter Gaza'. But the truth is that the Israeli authorities did not inform the Patriarchate's Chancellery of Cardinal Pizzaballa's authorisation to enter Gaza until late in the evening.

But it was Yisrael Katz, the Foreign Minister of the Netanyahu government, who spoke harshly to express his disapproval of the Pope's words: The blame should be placed solely on the terrorists, not on the democracy that defends itself against them. Enough of these double standards and the rage against the Jewish state and its people. The cruelty is that terrorists hide behind children when they try to kill Israeli children. The cruelty is in holding a hundred hostages for 442 days, including an infant and children'.

But the facts contradict the minister's claims. In a video posted by Unrwa on its Telegram channel just last Friday evening, agency staff can be seen pulling victims from under the rubble of the Khallah family home in Jabalia. The Israeli air strike in the northern part of the Strip killed twelve members of the same family, including seven children. The Israeli army (IDF) said in a statement that it had hit a number of terrorists operating from a Hamas military site and posing a threat to IDF forces operating in the area. However, according to an initial assessment by emergency services, the number of casualties reported as a result of the attack does not match the information provided by the IDF.

Meanwhile, ceasefire negotiations stop and start. Israel has reportedly agreed to release some 200 Palestinian prisoners serving life sentences as part of an agreement. Hamas, for its part, has reportedly agreed to release eleven hostages in the first 'humanitarian' phase of the ceasefire.