

'Convince people that peace is possible,' says Gaza Catholic parish priest

by [Claire Giangravé](#)

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Displaced Palestinians walk past the ruins of destroyed buildings along the Gaza City shoreline on June 9. (AP Photo/Jehad Alshrafi)

In a recorded message, the parish priest of the only Catholic Church in Gaza spoke about the struggles of the roughly 500 refugees sheltered there, including 50 children, as hope dwindles amid continued bombings by Israeli forces.

“While the bombings continue, unfortunately the situation will continue to worsen,” said Gabriel Romanelli, the Gaza parish priest, adding that every bomb “means more death, more injuries, more destruction, less hope from a humanitarian point of view.”

Romanelli's recorded remarks were shared during a meeting of Italian journalists in Ascoli Piceno, Italy, on June 10. [Pope Francis](#) would call the Gaza parish every evening at 8 p.m., even during his hospitalization at the Gemelli Hospital in Rome, placing the church under the international spotlight. The parish continues to ring its bells at the same hour to remember those calls, known affectionately as the "pope's hour."

Christians and Muslims of all ages find shelter at the parish, which has been transformed into a home and refuge from the Israel-Hamas war. What were once classrooms have become bedrooms hosting 10 to 15 people "who have lost everything—their families, loved ones, their family home, their schools, their workplace. The situation is terrible," the priest said.

Romanelli, a native of Buenos Aires, Argentina, said the more than 2 million people living in Gaza "do not see a future," because "there is no clear signal that they will be able to live, to rebuild their lives."

"Everyone needs this to end," he added.

The priest, who according to media reports is also battling cancer, said people in Gaza are in dire need of food, water, and medicine. He explained that meat is difficult to find and food prices have grown exponentially, making even vegetables unattainable for most. Banks have been closed in the Gaza Strip for 20 months, he said, and sugar is now sold by the spoonful.

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which supports Catholic communities in the Holy Land, provides the parish with some cans of highly sought after flour to bake bread. "We have been sifting flour for months," Romanelli said, explaining that the flour is so full of worms it must be sifted two or three times.

Israel has blocked humanitarian aid from entering Gaza, despite Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying he would lift the siege in the region last month. A boat of activists carrying aid to Gaza, including Greta Thunberg, was intercepted on Monday. News reports also say Israeli forces fired near an aid distribution center.

Before his death, Pope Francis ordered that the popemobile he rode in Bethlehem in 2014 be transformed into a mobile medical unit for Gaza. But according to the Catholic charity Caritas Jerusalem, the vehicle was not allowed to enter Gaza.

“We continue to have a strong spiritual life,” Romanelli said, adding that the church hosts meditations, prayers and the rosary. After prayers, children are encouraged to go outside to play but run back inside when they hear planes overhead for fear of bombings or shrapnel. “Then everyone is outside again,” Romanelli said. “One gets used to it.”

Despite the hardship, the priest said those living in the parish “are fine,” and he asked people “to pray, to work for peace, to convince people that peace is possible.”

Pope Leo XIV called for a ceasefire in conflict areas around the world, including Gaza, during his first Sunday address as pope and later made an appeal for “the entry of dignified humanitarian aid and to put an end to the hostilities, whose heart-rending price is being paid by children, the elderly and sick people.”

Leo has the difficult task of negotiating relations with Israel, which were strained during the last year of Francis’s pontificate due to the late pope’s critical remarks about the Israeli offensive in Gaza. —Religion News Service