



Fr. Gabriel Romanelli teaches the Western alphabet to children from Holy Family Parish in Gaza City after daily Mass in May 2025. Holy Family is the only Catholic church in the Gaza Strip. The late Pope Francis had called the church nightly since Oct. 7, 2023. (Courtesy of Gabriel Romanelli)



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After Pope Francis' death, the Vatican's charitable arm Caritas said in early May that the late pontiff had donated one of his popemobiles to be converted into a mobile health unit to serve the children of Gaza.

Two weeks later, the retrofitted popemobile is nowhere to be seen in Gaza and is not expected anytime soon, said Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, the pastor of Holy Family Parish, [the only Catholic church on the Gaza Strip](#).

The popemobile remains a beacon of hope, a small sign of solidarity with the Catholic Church. Yet it also symbolizes the unfulfilled promise for the people of Gaza, just as Holy Family Parish has become a steadfast symbol of resilience amid a humanitarian catastrophe.

"Undoubtedly it is a very strong, very good sign," Romanelli said of the popemobile, "which we received with enormous surprise and enormous joy, to know that Pope Francis thought until the end about how we can help the society and the children of Gaza."

Although the vehicle has not reached Gaza — "nothing comes in here at this time" — it represents a powerful legacy of care, Romanelli said, and a legacy of concern from the late pope, who left the battered parish with memories of a poignant ritual.

"Currently, the borders are closed. As soon as they open for humanitarian services we will try to get it [the popemobile] into Gaza," Harout Bedrossian, head of resource development at Caritas Jerusalem, said in a May 21 email.

"We cannot give you an exact date due to the unstable situation," Bedrossian said.



Final work is carried out to transform the popemobile used by Pope Francis during his 2014 Holy Land pilgrimage into a mobile health unit for the children of Gaza. The retrofitted popemobile has not yet arrived in Gaza. (OSV News/Courtesy of Caritas Jerusalem)

Each evening the parish marks what they call "the pope's hour." At 8 p.m. local time, the church bells ring out — a solemn echo across a city hollowed by war. It is a ritual born from a deeply personal connection with Pope Francis, who had called the parish at that same time every day from Oct. 7, 2023, until his death on April 21.

"It was really a very emotional and strong moment, but also comforting, because we all saw his departure on Easter Monday as a sign of divine benevolence," Romanelli said in an interview with the National Catholic Reporter on Whatsapp. "It is a gesture we make to continue to feel his presence and the presence of the church."

The Catholic church shelters roughly 500 people in the Holy Family compound. Many are not Christian. Among the Catholic and Orthodox faithful are 58 Muslim children and elderly, cared for by the Missionaries of Charity — the Sisters of Mother Teresa

of Calcutta. The war has made the parish a rare sanctuary, its pews transformed into beds, its altar a place for both prayer and play.

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Israel intensified its military offensive in Gaza on May 20, launching airstrikes that [killed](#) at least 85 Palestinians while allowing limited humanitarian aid into the besieged enclave.

The United Nations and Western allies have condemned the toll on civilians, with dozens killed in recent days and 2 million residents facing [starvation](#) after nearly three months of blockade. Though Israel permitted dozens of aid trucks to cross into Gaza under international pressure, logistical barriers have kept critical supplies from reaching those most in need.

Key allies like the United Kingdom imposed sanctions and suspended trade talks, while dissent within Israel over the war's conduct grows louder.

Before Oct. 7, 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel, about 1,000 Christians lived in Gaza, of whom only 135 were Catholic. Now, Romanelli said, "about 300 left mainly at the beginning of the war when the borders were open. Then we lost 52 Christians, 20 of them had violent deaths." Among the dead: two Catholic women shot by Israeli Defense Forces snipers inside the church compound, and a beloved music and English teacher, gunned down in the street, he said.



Catholics in Holy Family Parish in Gaza City watch the first appearance of Pope Leo XIV after his election on May 8, 2025. Fr. Gabriel Romanelli has not heard from Pope Leo, but said he would accept the new pontiff's call "with much pleasure." (Courtesy of Gabriel Romanelli)

Inside what has become what Romanelli called an "oasis-shelter," faith persists even as daily life collapses. Electricity is rare. Food, water and medicine are scarcer still.

[The Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa](#) has provided food and humanitarian aid, he said. "However, for the last three months we have not received help because everything is closed. A sign of our need is that the little flour we have, we have to sift it two or three times, because there are worms in it."

The water, when available, cannot always be purified. Bombings have destroyed most solar panels and generators. Basic medicines — let alone those for chronic or emergency conditions — are unavailable. "Several among the refugees we host have

dysentery. The ibuprofen I use expired two years ago, for example," Romanelli said.



Fr. Gabriel Romanelli prays with children in Holy Family Parish in Gaza City in May 2025. From Oct. 7, 2023, until his death April 21, Pope Francis called the parish at the same time every night. (Courtesy of Gabriel Romanelli)

In the Gaza Strip, the humanitarian crisis has gotten worse, according to a United Nations aid worker on the ground. Access routes effectively have been sealed, nearly stopping the flow of essential aid. "The situation is tragic because nothing has been coming in for quite a lot of days," said the humanitarian worker who asked not to be identified for security reasons.

He said just seven trucks were expected earlier in the week. "It would be useless because it would take about 200 trucks a day to feed 2.5 million people, so seven trucks would be like giving three candies to 100 people," he said.

Amid shelling, civilians have been pushed to the brink of survival. "Seventy percent of the Gaza Strip is no longer livable, and the remaining 30% is destroyed anyway,"

the worker said. "People are now living on the streets, on the sidewalks, because there is no more physical space."

As families sleep under open skies with bombs falling nearby, the most urgent needs — food, water and medicine — remain unmet. "We are holding out on canned food supplies that came in by truck before they blocked any aid from entering," he said.

The violence is never far for the little Catholic community, either. During the interview, Romanelli said a distant explosion interrupted a children's soccer game.

"It was far away and the children's soccer game has continued undisturbed," he said. "But usually if the 'boom' is closer and louder, everyone runs to shelter in the church, and after two or three minutes everyone goes back to play."

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In those moments, he said, life swings between terror and resilience. "Yes, unfortunately, yes, we have gotten used to it, but each time the depression gets higher and higher," he said. "That's why each time we try to find the strength we don't have anymore, and make the children play, make them sing and distribute the little we have to them."

As for Pope Leo XIV, Romanelli has not spoken to him. "I would love to talk on the phone with him, but at the same time we feel and know about the closeness of Pope Leo with a different style. If one day he wants to call us, sure, with much pleasure."

During [Pope Leo's first Wednesday public audience](#), a tradition with popes, the new pontiff called for Israel to allow aid to be delivered in Gaza.

"It is increasingly worrying and painful the situation in the Gaza Strip," Leo said today (May 21) in St. Peter's Square. "I renew my heartfelt appeal to allow the entry of decent humanitarian aid and to end the hostilities whose heartbreaking price is paid by children, the elderly and the sick."

Romanelli, too, is enduring a private battle: a colon cancer diagnosis. "I have not been able to get tumor markers and blood tests because the labs that are left here in Gaza, maybe three in total, are destroyed," he said. "I was able to get a CT scan done in April, and so far everything seems to be going well."

Still, he said he places his strength in faith — and called on others to join him in that struggle. "To Catholics around the world, I ask that they continue to pray and offer sacrifices, because God accepts prayers and we hear prayers. We ask every person of goodwill in the world to pray."

This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** feature series. [View the full series.](#)