

Sister Nabila: Gaza, where faith is stronger than bombs.

Sister Nabila lived for six months the brutality of the ongoing war in Gaza. At the beginning of June, she shared about her experience at a conference in Milan, Italy.



Sr. Nabila speaking in Milan

Faith and hope "have never failed us," even in the "terrible days" when the Israeli army "was bombing near us", near the Holy Family parish, with people from the community "wounded by shrapnel" who could not be treated 'because of a lack of hospitals and medicines," said Sister Nabila Saleh, of the Rosary Sisters, during her sharing.

The Egyptian-born nun experienced first-hand the conflict between the Jewish state and Hamas in Gaza. She managed to leave the territory with a group of parishioners only in early April after experiencing terrible moments, like the attack on St. Porphyry Greek Orthodox Church.

"When the attack began, we immediately ran to see how they were doing," she said, "because, as Christians, we all know each other. The other terrible moment was when the Israeli snipers killed two women, mother and daughter, in front of our eyes... They were about to return to the church. I helped the daughter-in-law recover the body of the elderly woman, then we waited from noon to four in the afternoon before bringing in the second body as well."

Unlike previous wars in Gaza, which took place over a shorter period and with less intensity, this time "it came suddenly, with no forewarning, and no place that could be considered safe. This time," the nun explained, "they hit everywhere."

Israeli soldiers "knew that we Christians had found shelter inside the churches; it was a shock" to realise that we were not immune to the attacks, to the bombs. "We didn't think it would happen, like when they entered Zeitoun (the neighbourhood where the Catholic parish church is located) with tanks and, behind them, snipers deliberately shooting."

Sister Nabila Saleh lived in Gaza for 13 years and experienced first-hand the violence of the Israeli-Palestinian



The elderly woman and her daughter, who were killed by snipers while they were returning to the church after going out in search of food.



Sr. Nabila cooking for the people who took refuge in the church.

conflict, although the intensity of the war triggered by the Hamas attack on 7 October is unparalleled.

She spent more than six months as a refugee in the Church of the Holy Family together with more than 650 displaced Christians, under bombs, in desperate humanitarian conditions, taking care of the most vulnerable.

She recounted her experience at the Centro PIME in Milan, Italy, together

with other sisters, including Sister Bertilla Murj and Sister Martina Bader, from Jordan, who have worked in Gaza for a long period of time.

The “faith” shown by everybody was “the source of our hope. During the bombings we went to church and prayed the rosary, with people shouting, crying, and praying,” not knowing if they would survive much longer. “For me, those were very hard months,” the nun said. But she learnt that “nothing in the world has worth, only the Lord has worth. Not riches, things of which nothing remains. I tried to represent the faith that comes from the Lord, to have hope, even if I was afraid and cried.”

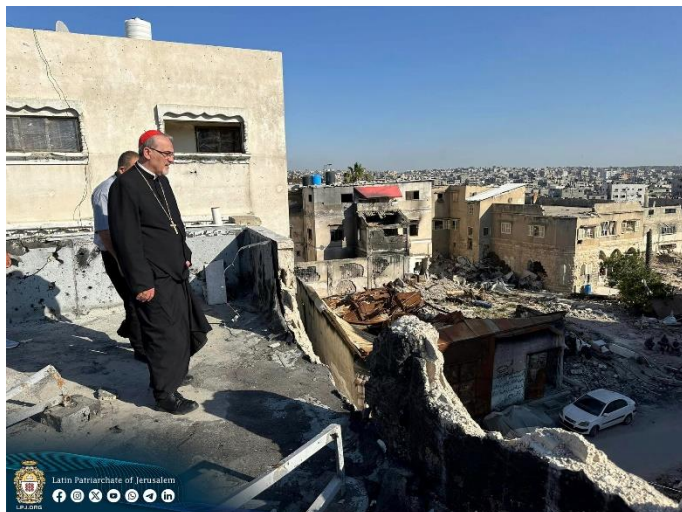
The value of life is even greater “when you see bodies and devastation all around you, people buried, others dying for lack of care” even from illnesses that can be easily treated in normal times.

Children are the first to suffer, something Sister Nabila knows too well. Her order established a school in Gaza, appreciated by the whole population, attended mostly by Muslim pupils, including children of some Hamas leaders. “Children have lived through five wars in just a few years, and they bear the brunt of it. Just think of a 10-year-old boy who has only known violence. In schools we encounter hyperaggressive behaviour, which is why we have started educational programmes to address the problem. During the months of fighting, we tried to make them play, despite the horrors.”

The Rosary Sisters' own school suffered serious bombing damage. Three teachers and several students are among the 37,000 casualties of the war. “In the parish we tried to organise lessons, but it was impossible because of the intensity of the attacks. What future can we imagine for these children?” wonders Sister Nabila.



A view of Rosary School after the bombing.



Card. Pizzaballa visiting Gaza.

The nun left Gaza in early April, together with a group of Christians, travelling from Gaza City to the Rafah crossing, not without risks and dangers. “They have been very hard months. At the start, only the King of Jordan sent some aid from the sky and our young people risked their lives to recover it”

The visit of Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa and the return of the parish priest Fr. Gabriel Romanelli in mid-May - he was away from Gaza when the war began - were among the few moments of joy and consolation. But “the deputy

parish priest, Fr Yousef Asad, did a great job.”

“Of course, the presence of the cardinal was very important. Seeing that the head of the Church had the courage to visit, even in such hard times, was a source of grace; it instilled courage despite the strong desire to flee.”

Asked what the people of Gaza want now, Sister Nabila says without hesitation: “Peace! It's very hard to live in war all the time. We miss the voices that really work for peace. Both peoples have the right to live in peace.”

Hopefully, “this war will close the book on all wars. People today don't think about Hamas or Fatah, they think about how to stay alive tomorrow, how to feed their children.”

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