

A Flock Under Pressure: The Persecution of Christians in the Holy Land

The cradle of our faith is also, increasingly, a place of suffering for those who bear the name of Christ.

The land that gave the world its Saviour now struggles to keep His followers. Across Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, the ancient Christian communities of the Holy Land face a convergence of pressures — armed conflict, demographic decline, legal vulnerability, and acts of deliberate hostility — that threaten their very survival as a living presence in the land of the Incarnation.

A Dwindling Remnant

The numbers tell a sobering story. Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, has noted that his pastoral jurisdiction encompasses approximately 190,000 Christians in Israel, 45,000 in the West Bank, and roughly 500 in Gaza. These figures, already modest, continue to shrink. In Bethlehem, the city of the Nativity, the Christian share of the population has collapsed from 86 percent in 1950 to just 10 percent today. The causes are multiple: emigration driven by economic hardship and insecurity, lower birth rates relative to surrounding populations, and the accumulating weight of life lived in conditions of chronic uncertainty.

In Gaza, the situation is most acute. Before 2007, Gaza's Christian population was officially estimated at more than 3,000. Years of conflict and isolation steadily reduced that number, and the most recent war accelerated the decline, as repeated fighting, severe economic hardship, and blockade conditions pushed more families to leave. Only three churches remain officially active in the Strip: the Greek Orthodox St. Porphyrios Church, the Roman Catholic Holy Family Church, and the Gaza Baptist Church. For Gaza's Christians — now numbering fewer than 1,000 — Easter 2026 was observed not as a celebration but as yet another sombre observance amid displacement and severe shortages.

War and Its Wounds

The conflict unleashed by the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, brought devastation upon the entire population of Gaza, but Christians — already a tiny and exposed minority — have borne particular hardship. Cardinal Pizzaballa, following his most recent visit to Gaza, reported that roughly 80 percent of the territory's infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed, and that around 400 people were sheltering on the grounds of the Holy Family parish under the care of Father Gabriel Romanelli, while the majority of displaced persons continue to live in tents. *Aleteia*

Speaking in Rome in January 2026, Cardinal Pizzaballa cautioned that after what has happened and is still happening in Gaza, it is difficult to see a short-term solution between Israelis and Palestinians. "The wounds are still deep, people are disoriented, with weak leadership," he said. "Neither side wants to hear about the other: the relationship has broken down." *Vatican News*

Even following the ceasefire reached in October 2025, the Cardinal noted that the situation of Christians in the Holy Land had barely improved, with living conditions remaining very complicated, especially in Gaza and the West Bank. *INFOVATICANA*

Acts of Hostility and Discrimination

Beyond the ravages of open conflict, Christians in the Holy Land have faced a pattern of deliberate harassment and vandalism. In 2024, a total of 111 incidents targeting Christians were recorded, ranging from verbal harassment to physical assaults on clergy to vandalism of churches and holy sites. Thirty-five of these attacks were directed specifically at religious properties — sacred spaces made into symbols of vulnerability. *Zenit*

Recent events in the West Bank illustrate the precariousness of Christian life even in places not directly touched by fighting. In the Christian village of Taybeh — the last entirely Christian Palestinian town in the West Bank — intervention by Israeli authorities sparked anxiety among residents and clergy who feared that a traditional Marian festival might be forcibly cancelled. Only after direct efforts by Cardinal Pizzaballa were preparations allowed to resume and the celebration eventually proceed. *Zenit*

In the Galilee region, organized crime has taken a heavy toll on Arab communities broadly, with over 230 killings recorded in a single year. Christians, as a small minority within the Arab population, find themselves caught in overlapping vulnerabilities. *Zenit*

The Voice of the Church

The Holy See has not been silent. The Holy See's Permanent Observer to the United Nations in Geneva stated before the world body in early 2026 that nearly 400 million Christians worldwide face persecution or violence, making them the most persecuted religious community on earth. He also condemned what he described as more subtle and often silent forms of persecution — including gradual marginalization from social and professional life and administrative restrictions that, in practice, nullify legally recognized rights. *EWTN*
A Call to the Order

For members of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, these realities are not distant abstractions. The Order's foundational mission — the support of the Church in the Holy Land and the sustenance of Christian life there — is animated precisely by the conditions described above. The Ensuring the Future Capital Campaign and the ongoing work of the Lieutenancy are direct responses to a crisis unfolding in real time.

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The persecuted Church of the Holy Land does not ask for pity. It asks for solidarity. It asks that those who bear the Cross of Jerusalem upon their breast remember that the same Cross is carried daily, in flesh and blood, by a remnant community that has never ceased to pray where Christ was born, walked, suffered, and rose.

