



Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, and Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for the Service of Charity, arrive in Bethlehem, on the West Bank, Dec. 24, 2023, to mark Christmas celebrations at a difficult time for Palestinian Christians amid ongoing the Israel-Hamas war. (OSV News/courtesy Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)



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Christmas this season in the Holy Land will be celebratory, despite ongoing bloodshed and war, the patriarchs of the Holy Land said, as Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa encouraged pilgrims to come back to the birthplace of Jesus.

During his visit to Germany, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem said he is counting on a rapid normalization of pilgrimage tourism following the ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon.

"Pilgrimage is now absolutely safe and also important for society," Pizzaballa said in Cologne Dec. 3, reported KNA, a Catholic news agency in Germany. The cardinal hoped that the relative calming of the war situation in Israel will lead to more pilgrims arriving again over the Christmas season.

Pilgrimages and religious tourism are an important economic factor for many Christians in the region, with many not able to make any income for their families as tourists disappeared and stores across pilgrimage sites remain closed for the 14th month since Oct. 7, 2023. That is when Hamas attacked Israel killing 1,200 people, which ignited the Israel-Hamas war focusing on the Gaza Strip, destroying vast parts of the enclave and killing over 45,000, according to Gaza's health ministry.

As Advent approached, the patriarchs and heads of the churches in Jerusalem issued a statement, however, that war this year won't stop the joyful celebration of Christmas in the land of Jesus.

"Last year, as a means of standing in solidarity with the multitudes suffering from the newly erupted war," the patriarchs made "a mutual decision to call upon our congregations to forego the public display of Christmas lights and decorations, along with their associated festivities."

But, the patriarchs admitted, their intentions were misunderstood.

"While our intentions in doing so were good, many around the world nevertheless misinterpreted this call to signify a 'Cancellation of Christmas' in the Holy Land — the very place of our Lord's Holy Nativity" and because of this "our unique witness to the Christmas message of light emerging out of darkness ... was diminished not only around the world, but also among our own people," they wrote Nov. 22.

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Therefore this year, the patriarchs said, they "encourage our congregations and people to fully commemorate the approach and arrival of Christ's birth by giving public signs of Christian hope."

At the same time, the patriarchs asked all of the faithful to keep the suffering people of the Holy Land in their prayers, "reaching out to them with deeds of kindness and charity, and welcoming them as Christ himself has welcomed each of us."

This way, they said, "we will echo the Christmas story itself, where the angels announced to the shepherds glad tidings of Christ's birth in the midst of similarly dark times in our region ... offering to them and to the entire world a message of divine hope and peace."

Meanwhile, for those who cannot celebrate Christmas in the land of Jesus, the Franciscan-led Custody of the Holy Land launched a special campaign for Advent, encouraging the use of social media to experience where Jesus spent his first hours — in preparation for the Jubilee Year, in which "hope" is the main theme.

"The Holy Land is still marked by the harsh reality of war, with its consequences: the absence of pilgrims, the economic crisis and the lack of confidence in the future," the custody wrote in the Nov. 28 announcement, inviting "the faithful all over the world to be 'pilgrims of hope' and visit Bethlehem, even only virtually."

Through social media reels "and a special virtual tour of the Grotto of the Nativity, it will be possible to be immersed in the environment, which was the first to welcome Jesus, in swaddling clothes, at the start of His terrestrial life," the custody said.

The reels will be posted on the Facebook, Instagram and YouTube pages of the Custody of the Holy Land.

The virtual tour opened Dec. 1 on the social media pages of the custody and from its website, <https://www.custodia.org>.