



Haifa University Peace Prize Assigned to Cardinal Pizzaballa

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17 September 2025 - Christ is in Gaza, “crucified in the wounded and buried under the rubble.” With that image, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, reaffirmed the Church’s presence in the enclave after his latest visit to the Strip. In August, he refused to evacuate the Holy Family parish in Gaza City, “a shelter for hundreds of civilians,” despite Israel’s announcement of its occupation. After October 7, 2023, he offered himself to Hamas in exchange for Israeli children held hostage. Now, the Laboratory for Religious Studies at the University of Haifa, led by Uriel Simonsohn, has assigned him their Annual Peace Award, which, for the past three years, has honored religious leaders who build bridges for local and regional peace.

Professor Simonsohn, why was the award assigned to Cardinal Pizzaballa this year?

After Amir Muhammad Sharif Odeh in 2023 and Rabbi David Rosen in 2024, we chose the Latin Patriarch because he had the courage to offer himself in place of the Israeli hostages and managed to show balance and empathy for both Israeli and Palestinian victims. He was among the first to denounce the harm inflicted on civilians in Gaza and, when the Catholic community there was hit by bombings, he went personally to offer support and solidarity. He did the same in Taybeh, in the West Bank, after settler attacks on the local Christian population. His public stance, his courage to stand alongside the victims, and his willingness to substitute himself for others place him in a unique position among the country’s religious leaders.

Pizzaballa is the man who chose to “stay” in Gaza, refusing to obey the IDF’s evacuation order, which included the Catholic parish in Gaza. He did not want to abandon either the civilians or the vision of a plural Holy Land, religiously as well as culturally.

Yes, and even before the war, he was a strong advocate of reconciliation, dialogue, and religious pluralism. His vision of peace is one of empathy toward all sides in the conflict. It is courageous, because he faces pressure from both camps to show solidarity with only one, and the Catholic Church itself has often been accused—especially by the Israeli government—of siding with the Palestinians. Despite that, he has not hesitated to voice a balanced position. For him, differences must be resolved through dialogue, not violence. He has long taken part in interfaith initiatives designed to bring communities around the same table, to air grievances and disagreements, but also to find common ground on which to build a shared vision of coexistence. This is exactly the mission of our Laboratory: to bring religious leaders together, to speak openly about their concerns, but also to identify points of agreement from which trust can grow.

On August 28, before news broke of a new plan for Gaza, Pizzaballa told the faithful that the proposed population transfer, was both immoral and contrary to international conventions. What message do hope this award will send—within Israel and beyond?

That we cannot remain silent in the face of such radical initiatives. And that leaders—especially religious leaders—must step forward and use their voice. People are suffering every day; there is no time to waste. Our message is twofold: we will not be silent in the face of attempts to transfer

civilian populations, and we call on other religious leaders to live up to their responsibility as moral authorities.

And how do you expect this award to be received in Israel, given the current polarization?

I expect some criticism, particularly from the more radical margins of the political spectrum. That is precisely why it is important for academia to take on this role. Even if universities often lean liberal, they are still regarded as a relatively neutral space. We are engaging with everyone, including those who hold views very different from Pizzaballa's, because dialogue is essential. I am ready to absorb the criticism. The university's leadership is fully behind this award—our rector will attend the ceremony on November 6—and we intend to stand firm.

Practically speaking, what role can religious leaders play in keeping spaces of dialogue and coexistence open, in a region where politics appears increasingly unable to do so?

Precisely because politics is paralyzed, religious leaders have the chance to step forward. They are not only spiritual guides but also social and civic figures, involved in education, solidarity, family life, and even issues like the environment and the economy. They can set an example, mediate for their communities, and launch joint initiatives.

That is what we have been trying to do in Israel since October 7: regular meetings among Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other communities in several cities. Out of these encounters have grown local initiatives—school visits, joint acts of solidarity. In Haifa, for example, after the city was hit by Iranian missiles, imams, rabbis, and priests visited together the damaged mosques, churches, and synagogues. It doesn't solve the political conflict, but at the local level, it builds trust. And without trust, there can be no coexistence.

Source: [Reset Dialogues](#).