The Church of Saint Porphyrius



The Church of Saint Porphyrius in Gaza: Sixteen Centuries of Faith and the Massacre of the Genocide War

The Church of Saint Porphyrius, the Greek Orthodox church in the Zaytun quarter of Gaza's Old City, is the oldest active church in Gaza and among the oldest in the world still in use. A church has stood here since around 425 CE, built in honour of Saint Porphyrius, the 5th-century bishop of Gaza whose tomb it holds; it was renovated in the Crusader period in the 12th century and again under the Ottomans. During the genocide war on Gaza it became a refuge for hundreds of Christian and Muslim families, until an Israeli airstrike on 19 October 2023 brought down one of its buildings and killed 18 of those sheltering there. This guide covers the church's history, architecture, its role in the life of Gaza's Christians and what it endured in the war.

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Quick Facts About the Church of Saint Porphyrius

The Church of Saint Porphyrius at a glance

Arabic name	كنيسة القديس برفيريوس / كنيسة الروم الأرثوذكس
Location	Zaytun quarter, Old City of Gaza
Denomination	Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem
First church	Around 425 CE
Renovations	Crusader period (12th century); Ottoman period, 1856
Tomb	Saint Porphyrius, 5th-century bishop of Gaza
Structure	Ship-shaped hall with sandstone walls about 80 cm thick
Status	Oldest active church in Gaza
19 October 2023	Israeli airstrike on the church compound kills 18 displaced people
UNESCO	Church complex recorded as moderately damaged

Saint Porphyrius: The Name Behind the Church

Saint Porphyrius was born in Thessaloniki, Greece, in 347 CE. After turning thirty he lived in Egypt for about five years, then went to Jerusalem and lived in the wilderness near the Jordan River before being sent as bishop to Gaza, then a stronghold of paganism. He is remembered in Orthodox tradition for spreading Christianity in Gaza, and archaeologists note that the church holds a special place for the Christians of the Levant, and of Gaza above all, because its patron was the first to confront paganism in their city. His tomb lies inside the church that bears his name, which Gazans know as the "Church of the Roman Orthodox".

Location

The church stands in the Zaytun quarter, in the Old City of Gaza, near the Great Omari Mosque and the Katib al-Wilaya Mosque, whose minaret rises beside the church. Together they form one of the oldest historic cores of the city, a symbol of the long shared life of Gaza's Muslims and Christians.

History Through the Ages

- **Byzantine period:** according to the foundation inscription, construction began in 425 CE on the initiative of Bishop Porphyrius, on the ruins of a pagan temple.
- **Crusader period:** according to Egyptian archaeologist Sherif Shaaban, the church was renovated in the 12th century and dedicated to Saint Porphyrius and the Virgin Mary.
- **Ottoman period:** it was restored in 1856 with the participation of Gaza's Christians, as a second inscription records.
- **Modern era:** restoration continued in phases until 2020, and the church remained the spiritual centre of Gaza's Orthodox community, the largest Christian denomination in the Strip, under the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

Architecture

The church is built in the shape of a ship, with a large hall roofed by cross vaults supported by stone buttresses and walls of hard sandstone about 80 centimetres thick. Its vaults rest on just two marble columns, one on each of the north and south walls, with Corinthian capitals, and some friezes and column bases still date to the Middle Ages. The sanctuary lies to the east, circular and topped by a half-dome. The church has three entrances: the main western door, a northern door, and a southern door opened more recently that leads to an upper balcony. Icons and religious paintings of Old and New Testament scenes cover its walls and ceiling. Beside it stand the building of the church council, parish halls and a cemetery where Gaza's Christians are buried.

The Church and Gaza's Christians

Gaza's Christian community is one of the oldest in the world. Its numbers shrank over decades, and many more emigrated under the blockade imposed since 2007, leaving only about 1,000 Christians today. Most belong to the Orthodox Church, and the Church of Saint Porphyrius has been their spiritual home, where they baptise their children, marry and bury their dead in its cemetery.

A Refuge in Every War

In every war on Gaza, the church has opened its doors to the displaced. During the 2014 war about 2,000 Palestinians, Muslims and Christians, sheltered in the church compound. When the genocide war began in October 2023, hundreds of families again took refuge there, believing that a 1,600-year-old church would be safe.

The Massacre of 19 October 2023

On the evening of 19 October 2023, more than 450 people were sheltering in the

church compound. An Israeli airstrike hit two of the compound's halls, and at least one building collapsed onto the families inside. **18 people were killed**, among them children, and many more were wounded. The church building itself was not destroyed, but the compound suffered heavy damage.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem condemned the strike as a war crime, stressing that targeting churches and their institutions, and the shelters they provide to protect innocent civilians, cannot be ignored. The massacre came two days after the strike on the courtyard of al-Ahli Arab (Baptist) Hospital, and shocked Christians around the world.

The Church Through the Genocide War

- **October 2023:** Besides the 19 October strike, the church's surroundings were hit earlier in the month, causing extensive damage to the compound.
- **July 2024:** A church annex was targeted again.
- **Throughout the war:** The church remained a shelter for displaced Christian families whose homes had been destroyed. According to Gaza's Government Media Office, Israel killed about 20 Christians during the war and repeatedly struck the three main churches in Gaza; more than 85% of Christians lost their homes completely or partially.
- **Other churches:** The Catholic Holy Family Church in Gaza City was also struck several times, including in July 2025, killing civilians sheltering there.
- **UNESCO:** In its assessment of Gaza's heritage, UNESCO recorded the Saint Porphyrius church complex as moderately damaged.

The Church Today (2026)

After the ceasefire of October 2025, the church continued to house dozens, or by the Patriarchate's account hundreds, of displaced Christian families. On 1 January

2026 the Christmas tree was lit in the church courtyard for the first time since the war began, ahead of Orthodox Christmas on 7 January, though the celebrations were limited to prayers. "Joy cannot be complete while our people still live in tents," a member of the church's board of trustees said. With only about 1,000 Christians left in Gaza, the church stands as a witness to the community's survival and to sixteen centuries of Christian presence in the city.

International Law and the Protection of Holy Places

The Fourth Geneva Convention protects civilians and the places where they shelter, and the **1954 Hague Convention** protects buildings dedicated to religion as cultural property. Under Article 8 of the **Rome Statute** of the International Criminal Court, intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion and against civilians is a war crime. The UN Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory has documented attacks on Gaza's religious and cultural sites during the war.

Frequently Asked Questions About the Church of Saint Porphyrius

Where is the Church of Saint Porphyrius?

In the Zaytun quarter of Gaza's Old City, near the Great Omari Mosque.

How old is the Church of Saint Porphyrius?

A church has stood on the site since around 425 CE. It was renovated in the 12th century and again in 1856. It is the oldest active church in Gaza.

Who was Saint Porphyrius?

Bishop of Gaza in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, born in Thessaloniki in 347

CE and remembered for spreading Christianity in the city. His tomb lies inside the church.

What happened at the church on 19 October 2023?

An Israeli airstrike hit two halls of the church compound where more than 450 displaced people were sheltering, bringing down a building and killing 18 people, including children.

How many Christians live in Gaza today?

About 1,000, down from several thousand before the blockade. Most belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, and more than 85% lost their homes in the war.

Conclusion

For sixteen centuries, the Church of Saint Porphyrius has kept the tomb of the bishop who brought Christianity to Gaza, standing beside the minaret of its Muslim neighbours in the heart of the Old City. In the genocide war on Gaza it opened its doors to the frightened, as it had always done, and paid with the lives of 18 of those it sheltered. Today its small, grieving congregation still prays beneath its ancient vaults, a living testimony that Gaza's Christians are part of its people and its story.

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