

Pope Francis delivers his blessing during the Angelus noon prayer he recited from the window of his studio overlooking St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Sunday, Nov. 22, 2020. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

Tim Reynolds

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The Associated Press

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Pope Francis met with NBA players at the Vatican on Monday, lauding them as “champions" and saying he supported their work on social justice.

The five players — Marco Belinelli, Sterling Brown, Jonathan Isaac, Kyle Korver and Anthony Tolliver — were joined in the delegation by NBA players' union executive director Michele Roberts and two other union executives, Sherrie Deans and Matteo Zuretti.

“We're here because, frankly, we're inspired by the work that you do globally," Roberts told the pope during the meeting in the papal library.

The union said the players spoke about their "individual and collective efforts addressing social and economic injustice and inequality occurring in their communities." Belinelli addressed the pope in Italian, and the group presented the pope with a commemorative basketball, a union-produced book highlighting efforts players have taken and an Orlando Magic jersey.

“You're champions," the pope said. “But also giving the example of teamwork, you've become a model, giving that good example of teamwork but always remaining humble ... and preserving your own humanity."

The audience was held days before a book comes out in which Francis supports demands for racial justice, specifically the actions taken following the killing of George Floyd, a Black man who died in May. A police officer in Minneapolis pressed a knee against his neck for minutes while Floyd said he couldn’t breathe.

“I was there to support my colleagues in their daily struggle in the United States, and not just for that," Belinelli said later Monday on Twitter. “I also went to show that athletes have an active responsibility in society and need to dedicate themselves toward changing things that don’t work. We athletes have a very big media platform and we’ve got to use it positively to reach where institutions are lacking.

“The pope had important words for us: We need to continue to be united, to operate as brothers, like a team, and to set an example for the younger generations,"

Belinelli continued. “The key is to remain humble. I will never forget this experience.”

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Roberts said Francis sought the meeting with the players, and that it “demonstrates the influence of their platforms." Demands for social and racial justice have been paramount among players, especially in recent months following the deaths of Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others.

Brown, in his remarks to the pope, told him about what he, Korver and the other Milwaukee Bucks went through in the NBA's restart bubble — particularly when they decided to sit out a playoff game against Orlando in response to the shooting of Jacob Blake, a Black man, by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

“It was raw and emotional for our team," Brown told the pope.

Brown sued officials in Milwaukee after getting taken to the ground, shocked with a Taser and arrested during an encounter with police in 2018, contending in that lawsuit that police used excessive force and targeted him because he is Black. A settlement where Brown would receive $750,000 plus an admission from the city that his civil rights were violated was agreed to this month.

“We are extremely honored to have had this opportunity to come to the Vatican and share our experiences with Pope Francis,” Korver said. “His openness and eagerness to discuss these issues was inspiring and a reminder that our work has had a global impact and must continue moving forward.”

The delegation did not wear masks during its papal visit. The union later said the group was required to undergo COVID-19 testing before meeting the pope and followed other Vatican protocols. Last month, the pope halted his public general audiences amid a surge of coronavirus cases in Italy and the Vatican.