News
Vatican



In this April 29, 2016, file photo Pope Francis shakes hands with Vice President Joe Biden as he takes part in a congress on the progress of regenerative medicine and its cultural impact, being held in the Pope Paul VI hall at the Vatican. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini, File)

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The Vatican on Thursday abruptly canceled the planned live broadcast of U.S. President Joe Biden meeting Pope Francis, the latest restriction to media coverage of the Holy See.

The Vatican press office provided no explanation for why the live broadcast of Biden's visit had been trimmed to cover just the arrival of the president's motorcade in the courtyard of the Apostolic Palace, where a Vatican monsignor will greet him.

Cancelled was any live coverage of Biden actually greeting Francis in the palace Throne Room, as well as the live footage of the two men sitting down to begin their private talks in Francis' library, at which time the cameras normally would have stopped running.

The Vatican said it would provide edited footage of the encounter after the fact to accredited media.

Biden, the second Catholic U.S. president, has met Francis three previous times, but this will be his first as president.

The audience was being closely monitored since U.S. bishops are due to meet in a few weeks for their annual fall convention, with one of the agenda items inspired by conservatives who contend that Biden's support for abortion rights should disqualify him from receiving Communion.

Though any document that emerges from the bishops' conference is not expected to mention Biden by name, it's possible there could be a clear message of rebuke.

Francis has strongly upheld the church's opposition to abortion, calling it "murder." But he has said bishops should be pastors, not politicians.

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The Vatican has provided live television coverage for the visits of major heads of state for years and had scheduled such coverage Friday for Biden and before him,

for South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who is also in Rome for a Group of 20 meeting this weekend.

Live broadcasts are particularly important because the Vatican hasn’t allowed independent photographers and journalists into papal audiences since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Vatican has continued to cite the pandemic as a reason to deny external media access to the beginnings and ends of papal audiences with visiting leaders, even though they are allowed into other papal events.

It is during those moments in the pope's library that reporters can view the gifts that are exchanged, watch as the formal photograph is taken and overhear remarks as the leaders arrive and depart to get a sense of how the pope and his guest have gotten along. Only the pope’s official photographer and Vatican video journalists are now allowed in.

The Vatican correspondents' association has protested the cancellation of such pool access and several media outlets, including The Associated Press, formally complained about Thursday's cut of the live Biden-pope broadcast and asked for an explanation.

The White House spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, was asked about the limited media access to Biden’s audience and said the administration was “working through every lever we have” to get more access.

Biden is travelling with his own pool of reporters who would normally be allowed into the pope's library for the beginning and end of the audience.

“We believe in the value of the free press. We believe in the value of ensuring you have access to the president’s trips and his visits overseas,” Psaki said during a White House briefing.

Noting that Biden was a guest and the Vatican the host, she added: “I can’t offer you a guarantee, but I can guarantee you we will continue to advocate.”