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Vatican



President Joe Biden, left, exchanges gifts with Pope Francis as they meet at the Vatican, Friday, Oct. 29, 2021. Photo by Vatican Media

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In Rome and at the Vatican, President Joe Biden found a safe haven from the debates taking place back home, where some U.S. bishops argue Catholic politicians should not be allowed to receive Communion if they support abortion rights.

Biden was in Rome from Friday (Oct. 29) to Monday to attend the G-20 summit, convening leaders from the world's strongest economic powers. On Friday, the president had a 90-minute private audience with Pope Francis at the Vatican, the longest meeting on record between a pope and a head of state. Biden told reporters that during the meeting, the pope said Biden was "a good Catholic" and should continue receiving Communion.

"This is a man who has a great empathy. He is a man who understands that part of his Christianity is to reach out and to forgive," Biden told reporters Sunday.

Pope Francis gifted the U.S. president a print depicting a pilgrim, his finger pointed toward St. Peter's Basilica, and carrying a shell, which the Vatican described as "a symbol meaning shelter, refuge from the adversities encountered on the journey of meditation and spiritual growth."

Biden attended Mass twice during his stay in Rome, once at St. Patrick's Church and another at the private residence of the U.S. ambassador to Italy, in an atmosphere described by those present as "welcoming" and "prayerful."

The warm and friendly meeting at the Vatican was in stark contrast with the heated debates taking place among U.S. bishops who are in the process of preparing a document on Communion, which is poised to address Catholic illiteracy surrounding the sacrament in the United States and to raise the question of whether Catholic politicians who favor abortion rights should be allowed to receive the Eucharist.

An alleged draft of the document, leaked on Tuesday by the Catholic blog The Pillar, suggests the document issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has taken a more muted approach on the subject of Communion for abortion-rights politicians

and does not mention Biden directly.

Catholics who “were knowingly and obstinately to repudiate her (the Catholic Church's) definitive teaching on moral issues,” such as supporting abortion policies, “should refrain” from receiving Communion, the leaked document states, adding that if they do receive the sacrament, it would be “a contradiction” and “cause grave scandal to others.”

The bishops are slated to issue the document on Communion at their fall conference in Baltimore this month.

When Biden stood in line to receive Communion at St. Patrick’s on Saturday evening, the Rev. Steven J. Petroff, rector of the church, said the president “came in line like everyone else, he received just like everyone else.” It was the first time a U.S. president attended Mass at St. Patrick’s.

Petroff, who was a concelebrant at the Mass, had little warning the president would attend. “To me, the most beautiful thing is that he came as an American, as a Catholic to worship and he joined us,” Petroff told Religion News Service.

The day’s reading, from the Gospel of Mark (12:28b-34), described Jesus agreeing with a scribe about the most important of God’s commandments — to love God and neighbor — and telling him: “Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.”

The Mass with Biden “wasn’t a Mass for him or about him. It was about that beautiful Gospel,” Petroff said, “and he was welcomed.”

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The Missionary Society of St. Paul, also known as the Paulists, has a long history of fostering relations between the United States and the Holy See. President Woodrow Wilson, who in January 1919 was the first president to meet a pope at the Vatican, asked Pope Benedict to allow Paulist missionaries to establish a home at St. Susanna’s church in Rome. They had their first Mass at St. Susanna’s in 1922.

When the first Catholic president of the United States, John F. Kennedy, was shot and killed, the American Catholic community in Rome mourned the loss with a funeral Mass on Nov. 25, 1963, at St. Susanna, while Pope Paul VI reportedly wept

and later condemned the “dastardly crime.”

Five years ago, the missionaries moved their residence to St. Patrick’s, which is still owned by Irish Augustinians. Since then, the missionaries have become a point of reference for American seminarians studying at the North American College in Rome, Anglophone expats and U.S. dignitaries and diplomats.

Petroff said he was pleased by the “banter and the friendliness” of Biden’s meeting with the pope and that the American community in Rome was welcoming toward the U.S. president. “Not everyone feels that way,” he added, stating that they received “a fair amount of pushback” from people in the United States.

“I mourn for the divisions that exist in the world and we are trying our best to overcome those in our own small way,” he added.

Petroff was also present when Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, another Catholic who has supported abortion-rights policies, visited Rome and the Vatican in mid-October. The Paulists have a long tradition of serving as chaplains at the English-language Marymount International School in Rome, and Petroff was happy to have some of the students, many of whom are children of foreign diplomats or hail from the United States, be present during the Mass and have a chance to meet Pelosi.

“You could just see she was beaming underneath the mask,” he said. Pelosi had to be escorted out of the church before the end of the service due to violent protests against vaccine mandates in the nearby Roman streets.

Biden’s second Mass in Rome took place Tuesday — All Saints' Day, when Catholics celebrate all saints known and unknown — in a small room of the private residence of the U.S. ambassador to Italy. Swapping the grandeur of St. Patrick’s for a more improvised setting — where a coffee table served as altar — the president took part in the Eucharist surrounded by Catholic members of his Cabinet.

“It was an honor and a privilege to celebrate liturgy with the president and a few members of his team on a feast day when we celebrate men and women who aren’t perfect but became holy though their humanity made whole by God’s grace, and overcame their own shortcomings and tragedies to be of service to other people,” said the celebrant, Jesuit priest David McCallum, in an interview with RNS.

“It was so not a political stunt,” he said, adding he was moved by the humility and prayerfulness of the little gathering. “No matter who was attending or their role, each person was there because they wanted to pray and participate actively in the Eucharist,” he said.

The president gifted McCallum with a presidential challenge coin similar to the one he gave to Pope Francis during their meeting at the Vatican. “He’s such an avid friend of the Jesuits,” McCallum said, adding that twice after the Mass Biden said: “God bless the Jesuits!”