News
Vatican
A chasuble U.S. President Joe Biden gifted to Pope Francis during their Oct. 29, 2021, meeting

A chasuble U.S. President Joe Biden gifted to Pope Francis during their Oct. 29, 2021, meeting is pictured at the Vatican. (CNS photo/Holy See Press Office)



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While waiting for parishioners to arrive at a cemetery for an All Souls' Day event Nov. 2, the pastor of a Washington parish grabbed the attention of his spiritual flock with a story about how a rarely seen object from their sacristy, possibly worn by a previous pope, had days earlier ended up in the hands of Pope Francis.

Jesuit Father Kevin Gillespie, pastor of Washington's Holy Trinity Church, a place that some high-ranking Catholic members of the U.S. government, including President Joe Biden, frequent when in Washington, told the crowd that it all began with a

phone call.

"So, what occurred was, the first week of September we got a call from the White House," Father Gillespie said.

He explained that Thomas Favret, Trinity's managing director of parish operations, who had in the past worked for the State Department, got a call from "a buddy of his," saying that "a very important American diplomat" was meeting with "a high Vatican official" at the end of October.

"I need something from your parish," the caller said, according to Father Gillespie.

It was understood they were talking about Biden and Pope Francis.

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"So, we were thinking of a little piece of baptistry from the 19th century, a little marble ... a pew?" Father Gillespie recalled with a laugh.

But someone else suggested the parish, run by Jesuits, the pope's religious order, was in possession of a chasuble that was likely worn in 1936 by Italian Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli during a visit to the U.S. when he stayed with Genevieve and Nicholas Brady, wealthy benefactors of the Society of Jesus.

About three years later, in 1939, Cardinal Pacelli became Pope Pius XII.

The future pope was close to the couple, who gifted the grounds and buildings for a Jesuit novitiate in Wernersville, Pennsylvania, and he visited what was called the Novitiate of St. Isaac Jogues when Jesuit Father Thomas P. Gavigan was the novitiate director there. Father Gavigan later served as pastor of Holy Trinity.

"He's the one that brought it (the chasuble) to Holy Trinity," Father Gillespie recalled.

The Jesuit past, the papal link — they were "the connections, the dots" when it came time to choosing a gift for Pope Francis from the parish, he added.

When Biden met with Pope Francis Oct. 29 at the Vatican, the chasuble, worn as the outermost layer of a priest's liturgical vestments, was placed in a custom-made frame crafted with" historic marble and White House wood," the White House said.

But it's unlikely that the vestment is remembered by most Holy Trinity parishioners.

"It was stuffed way back in the sacristy," Father Gillespie said.