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In this picture made available by Vatican Media Ukraine Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, left, meets with Pope Francis at The Vatican, Thursday, April 27, 2023. (Vatican Media via AP)

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Rome — April 27, 2023

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Ukraine’s prime minister said he asked Pope Francis during a private Vatican audience April 27 to help facilitate the return of Ukrainian children who were forcibly taken to Russia.

Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, briefing reporters on his half-hour audience with the pontiff, said he also invited Francis to come to Ukraine.

"I asked His Holiness to help us return home Ukrainians, Ukrainian children who are detained, arrested, and criminally deported to Russia,'' Shmyhal said.

The Vatican's brief statement on the audience did not go into particular points of the talks. It noted that Shmyhal met with the Holy See's secretary of state and foreign minister after his meeting with Francis.

During the "cordial discussions, which took place in the Secretariat of State, various matters connected to the war in Ukraine were highlighted, with particular attention to the humanitarian aspects and efforts to restore peace," the Vatican said.

Francis has repeatedly decried the war in Ukraine, which began 14 months ago with Russia's invasion of its neighbor. He has expressed a desire to visit both Ukraine and Russia in the context of his hopes of improving the prospects for peace.

The International Criminal Court last month issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia's children's commissioner, accusing them of war crimes for abducting children from Ukraine. Russia has denied any wrongdoing, contending the children were moved for their safety.

Speaking to reporters at the Foreign Press Association in Rome, Shmyhal said that in his talks at the Vatican he also discussed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's multi-point proposal for peace "and the steps the Vatican could take" in helping that plan become reality. He gave no specifics.

The prime minister also declined to venture what might next develop in Ukrainian-Chinese relations. Zelenskyy said April 26 that he and Chinese leader Xi Jinping had a “long and meaningful” phone call.

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During their conversation, which was the first known contact between the two presidents since the war began in February 2022, Xi said Beijing would send an envoy to Ukraine to discuss a possible “political settlement” to the conflict. The envoy is a former Chinese ambassador to Russia.

The hour-long call came two months after Beijing, which has long been aligned with Russia, said it wanted to act as a mediator and a month after Xi visited Moscow.

Shmyhal described the phone call as "extremely productive" and said it marked "a new stage in Ukrainian-Chinese relations."

"I'm also convinced it is an extraordinary beginning for developing our future relations,'' the prime minister said.

Asked about the May 18 expiration date of a deal brokered by the United Nations and Turkey to keep Ukrainian grain exports flowing during the war, Shmyhal said the shipments were another topic he broached with both Vatican and Italian officials.

Russia has threatened to reject another extension of the deal, complaining that Western sanctions have held up exports of its products.

"I asked both the leadership of Italy and the Holy See to help Ukraine continue the grain corridors work without restrictions," Shmyhal said.

The prime minister participated April 26 in a Rome conference hosted by the Italian government to bring together businesses eager to participate in eventual reconstruction projects in Ukraine.