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Pope Francis, sitting, leans forward to kiss something hanging by a chain around a man's nec

Pope Francis kisses the encolpion, an icon Orthodox and Byzantine Catholic bishops wear instead of a pectoral cross, as he greets Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, director of external relations for the Russian Orthodox Church, at the end of the pope's general audience May 3, 2023, in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Shortly after urging people to pray the rosary for peace and entrusting the people of Ukraine to Mary's care, Pope Francis met briefly with Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, director of external relations for the Russian Orthodox Church.

The pope's prayer requests and his meeting with the Russian Orthodox official came just three days after he told reporters the Vatican has a "mission" underway to promote peace in Ukraine, although he said it was too soon to provide details. Ukrainian and Russian officials said their governments were not involved.

At the end of the pope's weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square May 3, Anthony was the first of the special guests to greet Francis. The two shook hands and Francis reached out and kissed the metropolitan's encolpion, an icon Orthodox and Byzantine Catholic bishops wear instead of a pectoral cross.

The Russian Orthodox official spoke to the pope briefly before giving him an encolpion of his own.

The Vatican press office did not provide information about Anthony's visit.

A brief statement on the website of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church said Anthony traveled to Rome, with the blessing of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, "for a brief working visit."

He met May 2 with Cardinal Claudio Gugerotti, the former nuncio to Ukraine who now is prefect of the Dicastery for Eastern Churches.

"During the meeting a wide range of issues of mutual interest were discussed," the Russian Orthodox website said.

Returning to Rome from Hungary April 30, Francis had told reporters that since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, his only direct contact with Kirill was a 40-minute Zoom call less than a month after the war began.

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All other contact with Kirill, who strongly supports President Vladimir Putin, has been through Anthony, the pope said. "He is a bishop who was a pastor in Rome and knows the situation well, and through him I am in contact with Kirill," the pope told reporters.

The pope's general audience was his first public appointment in May, a month traditionally devoted to Mary.

In separate greetings to pilgrims and visitors who speak Italian, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Polish, Francis encouraged special prayers to Mary, especially for peace.

"At the beginning of this month of May, I recall the request of Our Lady of Fatima to the three shepherd children: 'Pray the rosary every day for peace in the world and an end to the war.' I, too, ask you to pray the rosary for peace," the pope told Portuguese pilgrims.

"May Mary, mother of Jesus and our mother, help us to build paths of encounter and dialogue and give us the courage to undertake them without delay," he said.

The pope asked Polish visitors to invoke Mary, queen of peace, "asking for perseverance in faith, unity and harmonious cooperation, but first of all peace, especially in neighboring Ukraine."

Addressing Italian speakers, the pope asked people to use the month of May "to renew your devotion to Our Lady. I encourage you to know Mary more deeply, to enter into intimacy with her, to welcome her as your spiritual mother and model of fidelity to Christ."

"To her, mother of consolation and queen of peace, I entrust the martyred people of Ukraine," he said.