Vatican
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Pope Francis sits in a chair on one side of the table as an older white-appearing man sits in ar

Pope Francis speaks with Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel during a private meeting June 20, 2023, in the papal studio of the Vatican audience hall. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Pope Francis had a 40-minute private meeting at the Vatican with Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel.

Holding banners calling for the release of political prisoners and respect for human rights in Cuba, a dozen people rallied at the end of Via della Conciliazione, the main boulevard leading to St. Peter's Square, as the pope was meeting Díaz-Canel in the studio of the Vatican audience hall June 20.

The president also met with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state.

As has become customary, the Vatican press office released a statement about the cardinal's meeting with Díaz-Canel but did not comment on what the pope and

president discussed.

"During the talks with the secretary of state," it said, "they discussed the importance of the diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Cuba, evoking moreover the historic visit of St. John Paul II in 1998," the 25th anniversary of which was in January.

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The two also spoke about life in Cuba today, "and the contribution that the church offers, especially in the area of charity," it said. In addition, they spoke about "international issues of mutual concern and the importance of continuing efforts to always foster the common good."

After their private meeting, Francis and Díaz-Canel exchanged gifts.

Francis gave the Cuban leader a small bronze statue of a dove holding an olive branch. Written in Italian on the base are the words, "Be messengers of peace."

The president gave the pope a sculpture in silver, bronze and wood. Using a spoon bent into the shape of a person seated reading a book, the piece is called, "The Reader." Díaz-Canel also gave the pope books of Cuban poetry by Fina García Marruz and by Cintio Vitier.