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Pope Francis grips the shoulder of an older, white-appearing man in a suit, who in turn grips P

Pope Francis meets Brazilian President Luiz Lula da Silva in a studio in the Vatican audience hall June 21, 2023. (CNS Photo/Vatican Media)



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Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, commonly referred to as Lula, gave Pope Francis a statue of Our Lady of Nazareth, patroness of the Amazon, and an invitation to attend the October festival that celebrates her.

The pope and president met in a studio in the Vatican audience hall for about 50 minutes June 21 in what pictures published by the president's photographer showed to be a warm meeting that even involved an affectionate embrace between the two leaders.

Speaking June 17 in the state of Pará, which hosts the yearly festival -- The Taper of Our Lady of Nazareth -- Lula said he planned to invite Francis to Brazil to attend the massive Marian procession that was declared an intangible UNESCO cultural heritage in 2013.

In an Instagram post published shortly after the meeting at the Vatican, Rosângela Lula da Silva, Brazil's first lady, confirmed that she and her husband invited the pope to the festival, which she called "one of the largest Catholic festivals in the world."

A June 20 government statement said Lula also anticipated discussing with the pope "current problems, such as the war between Russia and Ukraine, and the issue of hunger in the world."

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"We are in times of war, and peace is very fragile," Francis told the president in their meeting as shown in a video published by the Brazilian government. The pope then gifted Lula a bronze sculpture of a flower with the inscription "Peace is a weak flower."

The Vatican said Lula asked the pope for a rosary to give to his 80-year-old sister, which the pope gave him right away.

Lula also met with Archbishop Edgar Peña Parra, substitute secretary for general affairs in the Vatican Secretariat of State. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, was out of Rome for a book presentation.

The Vatican statement released after the meetings said there was a "positive exchange of views on the socio-political situation in the region" during the talks, as well as discussions on "the promotion of peace and reconciliation, the fight against poverty and inequality, respect for Indigenous peoples as well as protection of the environment."

Francis visited Brazil in his first international trip as pope in 2013 and has constantly demonstrated his concern for the Amazon region. He called a special Synod of Bishops for the Amazon in 2019 and in 2022 he installed the first cardinal from Brazil's Amazon region: Cardinal Leonardo Ulrich Steiner.