Vatican
Vatican News
A picture of an older white man wearing a red cape is next to a picture of President Joe Biden

Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi and U.S. President Joe Biden are pictured in a combination photo. Biden met July 18, 2023, with Zuppi, Pope Francis' special envoy to seek a peaceful resolution to the ongoing war in Ukraine. (OSV News photo/CNS file, Paul Haring/Tom Brenner, Reuters)

Carol Glatz

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — July 19, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The top priority for Pope Francis' peace envoy in his meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden was the repatriation of children forcibly deported from Ukraine to Russia, the papal nuncio to the United States said.

The overall objective of the July 18 meeting between Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, the pope's special envoy, and the U.S. president was "to contribute to peace and more precisely to cover the humanitarian aspects, in particular concerning children. The discussion revolved around this," Cardinal-designate Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, told the Italian daily, La Repubblica.

When asked if this meant that the immediate goal was facilitating the reunification of Ukrainian children with their families, the cardinal-designate said, "Yes, that is the cardinal's, and obviously the pope's, more specific goal, also because it is a more concrete issue."

"Obviously, however, the idea is to think about peace, in the complicated context that exists," he said in the interview, published in Italian July 19.

"The cardinal is very realistic, we try to do what is possible," Pierre said.

In general, Zuppi's mission was "to listen and be listened to. To report on what has already happened in order to see how one can proceed," the papal nuncio said.

"This is a first step. We are realists, we know perfectly well that this is not easy. But the pope wants to contribute to (bringing) attention to a situation that will in any case have to reach an outcome," Pierre said.

Meanwhile, the White House said in a statement July 18 that Biden shared with Zuppi "his wishes for Pope Francis' continued ministry and global leadership and welcomed the recent nomination of a U.S. archbishop as cardinal," referring to Chicago-born Cardinal-designate Robert F. Prevost, prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops.

The U.S. president and Zuppi "also discussed the Holy See's efforts providing humanitarian aid to address the widespread suffering caused by Russia's continuing aggression in Ukraine, as well as the Vatican's advocacy for the return of forcibly deported Ukrainian children," the White House statement said.

Advertisement

Francis had sent Zuppi, who is archbishop of Bologna and president of the Italian bishops' conference, to Washington as part of his ongoing humanitarian efforts to help Ukraine.

The July 17-19 visit is "in the context of the mission intended to promote peace in Ukraine and aims to exchange ideas and opinions on the current tragic situation and to support humanitarian initiatives to alleviate the suffering of the most affected and fragile people, especially children," the Vatican said in a communique July 17.

The cardinal traveled to Russia and Ukraine in recent months to meet with government officials on the pope's behalf.

He visited Bucha and Kyiv in early June and met with Ukrainian officials including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. In Moscow in late June, he met with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow; Yury Ushakov, a Kremlin foreign policy adviser and former ambassador to the United States; and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's commissioner for children's rights, accused by the International Criminal Court of aiding the abduction and deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Zuppi had told reporters at a book presentation in Rome July 4 that the Vatican was working on a "mechanism" to help Ukrainian children that have been taken into Russia, Vatican News reported.

"The children should be able to return to Ukraine," he said. "The first step is verifying the children and then seeing how to return them, starting with the most fragile."

"There is no peace plan (or) mediation," he said, "there is a great aspiration that the violence ends, that human lives can be saved starting with the defense of the youngest."

The cardinal said July 2 that Francis' concern is to "create all opportunities to see, to listen and encourage everything that can lead toward a resolution to the conflict."

"Of course there are small openings, we must look for them," he said. "It is precisely in the darkness that the light of peace must be sought while knowing no one has a magic wand."