News



Pope Francis meets with a group representing different faiths and Christian denominations that works on ecumenical and interreligious initiatives in Portugal at the apostolic nunciature in Lisbon Aug. 4. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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An auxiliary bishop from the Russian Orthodox Church's Western European archdiocese presented Pope Francis with an icon of the Virgin Mary and thanked the pontiff for his efforts on behalf of the Ukrainian people during a meeting of interfaith leaders Aug. 4 at the nunciature in Lisbon.

The gesture surprised the pope, who was visibly moved by the brief exchange he had with the bishop, said Fr. Peter Stilwell, a priest who leads the Patriarchate of Lisbon's Department of Ecumenical Relations and Interreligious Dialogue.

"It was a moment in which the pope was caught unawares," Stilwell told reporters after a press conference that featured him and three other interfaith leaders who attended the morning meeting with Francis.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Francis has called for peace and demanded an end to the conflict. The Vatican has offered to serve as a mediator between the two countries as Francis has sought to walk a diplomatic tightrope by condemning the invasion while trying to maintain some neutrality in order to play a credible role in brokering a peace deal.

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Francis has also had conversations with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, urging him in 2022 not to become an "altar boy" for Russian President Vladimir Putin. Russian media reported that Francis has offered to meet Kirill during the pontiff's scheduled visit to Mongolia later this year.

On Aug. 3, Francis met with a group of 15 Ukrainian pilgrims who traveled to Portugal for World Youth Day. The Vatican said the pope met with them for about a half hour, listening to their stories and sharing in their sorrows. An official photo from that event shows Francis kissing the Ukrainian flag.

During the pope's Aug. 4 exchange with the Russian Orthodox auxiliary bishop, Stilwell said the bishop told Francis that he and his community had been disturbed

by the "horror" of the war in Ukraine, in which hundreds of thousands of civilians and soldiers have been killed.



Fr. Peter Stilwell (NCR photo/Brian Fraga)

Stilwell said the bishop identified himself as "Peter," shook the pope's hand and told the pontiff that he was moved to meet the successor of St. Peter. The entire exchange lasted about 45 seconds, Stilwell said.

The remarkable exchange happened in a meeting where — Stilwell and other religious leaders said — Francis emphasized familiar themes of dialogue, mutual respect and fraternity between different religious traditions.

"The meeting with Pope Francis this morning was a recognition of this path that we have traveled in Portugal, both in ecumenism and unity between Christians but also in the domain of dialogue and interreligious cooperation," Bishop Jorge Pina Cabral of the Anglican Church of Portugal said during the press conference.

Suryakala Chhanganlal, who represented the Hindu community in Portugal during the meeting with Francis, said the pope affirmed a message of tolerance and fraternity in the interest of building a peaceful society.

"We want to follow [the pope's] appeal to make this journey together," Chhanganlal said.



Participants in an interfaith meeting with Pope Francis in Lisbon, Portugal, hold a press conference Aug. 4. From left: Bishop Jorge Pina Cabral of the Anglican Church of Portugal; Timóteo Cavaco, president of the Evangelical Alliance of Portugal; Suryakala Chhanganlal, who represented the Portuguese Hindu community; and Fr. Peter Stilwell, who heads the Patriarchate of Lisbon's Department of Ecumenical Relations and Interreligious Dialogue. (NCR photo/Brian Fraga)

During the meeting, Stilwell said, Francis spoke of keeping society open to the transcendence of God and the importance of fraternity and respect. At one point, he stretched out his arms to make a point about being open to friendship. The pope then put his hands in his pockets to warn against focusing solely on money and commerce.

"There are certain things which cannot be bought or sold," Stilwell said in describing Francis' message.

The meeting at the nunciature included 17 faith leaders, as well as Luís Manuel dos Anjos Ferreira, the rector of Lisbon University, and Israeli Ambassador Shapira Pain. Stilwell said the rector and ambassador organized the planting of six trees in the Lisbon Tropical Botanical Garden.

Stilwell said the six trees represented the religious traditions of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Stilwell also said that the cardinal-patriarch of Lisbon, Manuel Clemente, and Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin attended the tree-planting ceremony.

This story appears in the **World Youth Day 2023** and **War in Ukraine** feature series.