Vatican
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An older white man in a suit stands next to Pope Francis, who places his hand on an artwork a

Pope Francis gives U.S. Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a sculpture that says, "Peace is a fragile flower," during a meeting at the Vatican Aug. 21, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



by Catholic News Service

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The top-ranking U.S. military officer told reporters he and Pope Francis discussed the war in Ukraine, especially the war's impact on the people there.

Gen. Mark A. Milley, a Catholic, who as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the principal military adviser to the president, traveled to the Vatican Aug. 21 for a private meeting with the pope.

On his plane later, Milley told reporters traveling with him that the pope is "obviously very concerned about the hundreds of thousands of people who have been killed and wounded and the innocent civilian lives that have been lost."

"He's very interested in hearing my views on the state of the war and the status of the war, and the human tragedy that's unfolded in Ukraine," the general said, according to a report by Agence France-Presse.

Milley also said he and the pope discussed other issues, including talking "a lot about Africa," AFP reported.

The pope's "depth of knowledge of world events is quite impressive," the general said, adding that it was "a real privilege" to meet and speak with the pope.

Milley arrived in the library of the Apostolic Palace with a bag of rosaries, which Francis blessed.

After their private conversation, they were joined by Milley's wife, Hollyanne, and by Joe Donnelly, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See.

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Francis gave the general a bronze sculpture inscribed with the words, "Peace is a fragile flower."

Milley has been a strong advocate for U.S. military assistance to Ukraine.

At a news conference July 18 after a virtual meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, a coalition of 54 nations, Milley told reporters, "We stand firm in our ironclad commitment to provide practical support to Ukraine as it continues to defend its independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders."

He described Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine as "not only an illegal war of aggression, it's also an unnecessary war against a country that presented no military threat to Russia, an unnecessary, unjust, illegal war of aggression."

Francis, who constantly calls for prayers for peace in Ukraine and an end to the war, also has questioned the wisdom of continuing to send arms into the region, although he also has recognized Ukraine's right to defend itself from an aggressor.

"The din of weapons drowns out attempts at dialogue," he said Aug. 15, the feast of the Assumption of Mary as he entrusted prayers for peace to her.

The pope also has sent Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi of Bologna to Kyiv, Moscow and Washington as his peace envoy.