Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis attends his weekly general audience in the Pope Paul VI hall at the Vatican, Wednesday, Aug. 23, 2023. The Vatican on Tuesday, Aug. 29, 2023, sought to tamp down an uproar that erupted after Francis praised Russia's imperialist past during a video conference with Russian Catholics youths, insisting that he never intended to encourage modern-day Russian aggression in Ukraine. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini, File)

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Vatican City — August 29, 2023

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The Vatican on August 29 sought to tamp down an uproar that erupted after Pope Francis praised Russia's imperialist past during a video conference with Russian Catholic youths, insisting that he never intended to encourage modern-day Russian aggression in Ukraine.

The Vatican spokesman, Matteo Bruni, said Francis merely wanted to praise the positive aspects of Russia's spiritual and cultural history when he exalted Russia's imperial rulers Peter and Catherine the Great, encouraged young people to remember that past and praised their way of "being Russian."

Francis "certainly didn't want to exalt imperialistic logic or government personalities, who were cited to indicate certain historic periods of reference," Bruni said in a statement.

The Vatican, and before it the Holy See's embassy in Ukraine, spoke out after Ukraine's Greek Catholic leader, His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk, bitterly complained about Francis' remarks. The Vatican never published the comments, but they were shared on social media following Francis' video conference with a Catholic youth encounter August 25 in St. Petersburg.

Francis delivered a prepared text in which he encouraged the young Russians to be "artisans of peace" and to sow reconciliation "in this winter of war." But in his off-the-cuff remarks, Francis told the young Russians to always remember their past.

"Never forget your inheritance. You are the heirs of the great Russia. The great Russia of the saints, of the kings, of the great Russia of Peter the Great, of Catherine II, that great imperial Russia, cultivated, with so much culture and humanity," Francis said, according to the video clip. "Never forget this inheritance. You are the heirs of the great Mother Russia, go forward. And thank you. Thank you for your way of being, for your way of being Russian."

Shevchuk, who has frequently spoken out to complain about Francis' interventions about Russia, issued a blistering reply. He said the reference to Russia's imperial leaders "refer to the worst example of Russian imperialism and extreme nationalism."

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"We fear that those words are understood by some as an encouragement of precisely this nationalism and imperialism, which is the real cause of the war in Ukraine," he said. "War that every day brings death and destruction to our people."

The Vatican embassy in Kyiv said Francis' words had been misinterpreted and distanced itself from such interpretations, saying Francis never encouraged "imperialistic ideas."

"On the contrary, he is a convinced opponent and critic of any form of imperialism or colonialism, among all peoples and situations," the embassy said in a statement.

Francis has occasionally enraged both sides in the war in Ukraine with his off-the-cuff remarks. He has seemingly justified Russia's invasion by saying NATO was "barking at Russia's gates" with its eastward expansion. At the same time, Moscow lodged a formal diplomatic protest when he blamed most of the cruelty of the war on Chechens and other minorities, in an apparent effort to spare ethnic Russian troops from criticism.

On August 29, the spokesman for President Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Peskov, praised Francis' "deep" grasp of Russian history and said Russian teachers and schools were trying to teach young Russians of their heritage.

"And the fact that the pontiff, let's say, sounds in unison with these efforts, is very, very gratifying," Peskov said.

While Francis has frequently voiced solidarity with the "martyred" Ukrainian people, the Vatican has insisted it isn't taking sides in the war, in hopes of trying to remain a neutral player in search of peace.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 15-28, 2023** print issue under the headline: Vatican seeks to tamp down outrage over pope's words of praise for Russian imperial past.