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Pope Francis arrives as he holds his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Wednesday, Sept. 6, 2023. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

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Ukraine’s Greek Catholic bishops told Pope Francis on Sept. 6 that his words praising Russia’s imperial past had pained the Ukrainian people, bringing complaints about the Vatican’s diplomatic neutrality in Moscow's war on their country to the heart of the Holy See.

The bishops were in Rome for a periodic meeting and met with the pope in person for nearly two hours.

While thanking Francis for his prayers, the bishops said certain statements and gestures from the pope and the Vatican "are painful and difficult for the Ukrainian people, who are currently bleeding in the struggle for their dignity and independence," according to a statement from His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the head of the Greek Catholic church in Ukraine.

The 86-year-old Jesuit pope has enraged both sides in the war, repeatedly expressing solidarity with the "martyred" Ukrainian people but refusing to call out Russia or President Vladimir Putin by name. He seemingly expressed understanding for the invasion Putin ordered by saying NATO was "barking at Russia’s door" by expanding east.

Ukraine’s Greek Catholics have felt betrayed by such comments and were outraged again last month when Francis praised imperial Russia during an Aug. 25 video encounter with Russian Catholic youths meeting in St. Petersburg.

"You are the heirs of the great Mother Russia," Francis told the young people.

Moscow in turn praised the pope's comments, which the government in Kyiv criticized as "imperialist propaganda."

The Ukrainian bishops thanked Francis for supporting Ukraine's people, as well as for his humanitarian efforts and initiatives to free prisoners and to negotiate the return of Ukrainian children taken to Russia. But Shevchuk told the pope that "the faithful of our church are sensitive to every word of Your Holiness as the universal voice of truth and justice."

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Francis referred to what he told reporters Sept. 4 while flying home from Mongolia. He acknowledged during a news conference aboard the papal airplane that his reference to Russia’s imperial leaders Peter the Great and Catherine II was "perhaps not happy." He explained he mentioned the two because he learned about them in school and wanted to make the point that young people should embrace their heritage and culture.

The Vatican said in a statement Sept. 6 that Francis listened intently to what the Ukrainian bishops told him.

"He expressed his pain for the sense of powerlessness that is felt in war," the Vatican said, quoting Francis as saying such feelings of impotence must arise from "something of the devil that wants to destroy."

Francis also recalled seeing "one of the fruits of war" in the faces of Ukrainian children who "had lost their smiles."

He agreed to dedicate the month of October to prayers for peace in Ukraine and told the bishops that he prays for peace daily before an icon of the Virgin Mary that Shevchuk gave him long before the war, when both men lived in Buenos Aires.

The Vatican has a diplomatic tradition of not taking sides in conflicts, believing that such neutrality can open doors for peace initiatives. Francis assigned a seasoned church peace negotiator, Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, to conduct shuttle diplomacy on the return of Ukrainian children from Russia.

His off-the-cuff interventions have caused the Holy See’s diplomats headaches, but the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, defended the pope and his initiatives when he met with the Ukrainian Catholic leaders on Sept. 5.

"In the face of such repeated and significant gestures, it would be unfair to doubt his affection for the Ukrainian people and his effort, not always understood and appreciated, to help bring an end to the ongoing tragedy and ensure a just and stable peace through negotiation," Parolin told the bishops.