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A cardinal leans down to greet a seated Pope Francis in a Vatican reception hall

Pope Francis greets Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, president of the Italian bishops' conference, during a meeting with representatives of most of Italy's 227 dioceses and their programs to encourage the financial support of church activities during an audience in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Feb. 16. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, who said Pope Francis tapped him not to mediate but to encourage dialogue that could end Russia's war on Ukraine, flew to China Sept. 12, Italian media reported.

The Italian newspaper La Repubblica reported the cardinal could meet as early as Sept. 13 with Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang in Beijing.

Matteo Bruni, director of the Vatican press office, said Sept. 12 that the cardinal, accompanied by an official from the Vatican Secretariat of State, would be in Beijing Sept. 13-15 as "a further step in the mission desired by the pope to support

humanitarian initiatives and the search for paths that can lead to a just peace."

The Vatican confirmed in late May that Pope Francis had chosen Zuppi, the archbishop of Bologna and president of the Italian bishops' conference to lead a peace mission. As a priest and member of the Community of Sant'Egidio in the early 1990s, he helped facilitate the peace talks that ended the civil war in Mozambique.

As part of his new mission, the cardinal traveled to Kyiv in early June and met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. He went to Moscow in late June, where he met with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill and with a Kremlin foreign policy adviser. In July, he went to Washington where he had a private meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden.

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At the Sant'Egidio Community's annual interreligious meeting for peace, held this year Sept. 10-12 in Berlin, Zuppi described Pope Francis as "an incurable dreamer, one who never stops dreaming and pushing so that war does not become the rule."

Speaking to reporters outside the meeting, the cardinal clarified that Francis was not promoting the cardinal or himself as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia, but rather the pope hoped the cardinal could help press for real conversations to end the war, conversations that would require the support and input of the United States and China as well as Russia and Ukraine.

"It is clear that there are so many difficulties in the situation that has been created," Zuppi told reporters. "We must always remember [who is] the aggressor and [who is] the attacked, but we must find a solution."

His mission, the cardinal said, is to "continue to create all the necessary conditions and push in the only right direction, which obviously is a just and secure peace."

"It must be a peace chosen by the Ukrainians but with the guarantees, commitment and efforts of all," he said. Peace requires "the commitment of everyone, especially those who have the most importance, like China, obviously. Peace requires the efforts of all; it can never be something imposed by someone."

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.