Vatican

View from the Vatican





Pope Francis and Argentine President Javier Milei are to meet Feb. 12 at the Vatican. Milei also will attend the canonization of Maria Antonia de Paz y Figueroa, set to become Argentina's first female saint. Francis may visit his native Argentina in the fall. (NCR/OSV News/CNS/Lola Gomez, Reuters/Agustin Marcarian)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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Rome — February 8, 2024
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Not since Pope Francis welcomed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the Vatican last May has a papal meeting with a head of state been so hotly anticipated as next week's encounter with Argentina's new President Javier Milei.

On Monday, Feb. 12, at nine in the Roman morning, the man who buttressed much of his presidential candidacy last year with vocal opposition to the Argentine pope will arrive inside the Courtyard of San Damaso, where the flag of their mutual homeland will fly above the Vatican's Apostolic Palace.

The screeds that Milei once used to refer to the pope — among them: "son of a bitch", "filthy leftist" and "imbecile" — will be replaced with "Your Holiness" when the two men sit face-to-face.

The détente, in fact, began in November, when soon after Milei's election, the pope initiated a call with the president-elect to congratulate the right-wing populist on his victory.

During the eight-minute call, the two men reportedly discussed the difficult circumstances facing their country, where inflation is currently over 200%. Francis is said to have told Milei to have courage and wisdom to face the challenges ahead. Milei, for his part, said he had the courage but is working on the wisdom.



A couple in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican holds up a sign on an Argentine flag saying, "We are waiting for you in Argentina," as Pope Francis leads the recitation of the Angelus prayer Jan. 14. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Francis, of course, has had his share of awkward meetings with world leaders.

In 2013, his first encounter with Vladimir Putin got off to a bumpy start when the Russian president was nearly an hour late with the reliably early pope. And, of course, the pope's 2017 tête-à-tête with then-President Donald Trump after Francis had previously questioned Trump's Christianity seemed to have everyone on edge.

With Milei known for his bombastic behavior and his former career as a television pundit, there's no shortage of Milei and Trump comparisons. But Trump was credited for being on his best behavior when he arrived at the Vatican and it's a fair bet that Milei will follow suit.

As papal biographer Austen Ivereigh has written, for Francis, "the relationship comes before the agenda." During then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio's time as archbishop of

Buenos Aires, he had a special ministry to politicians of a wide range of backgrounds, Ivereigh added.

Less than a week after his election as pontiff nearly 11 years ago, Francis welcomed then-Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner to the Vatican at another closely scrutinized meeting. Despite their own rocky past, having clashed over a range of social issues, the two shared a meal together.

In an interview shortly after Argentina's presidential election, Francis dismissed Milei's past rhetoric against him, attributing it to things said "in jest" during a campaign.

"You have to distinguish a lot between what a politician says in the election campaign and what he actually does afterward, because then comes the moment of concreteness, of decisions," said the pope.

As for Milei, those concrete actions that have followed have included a two-page letter written to Francis last month expressing a desire that he visit their "beloved homeland."

Francis, after years of ambivalence about a homecoming trip, has in recent interviews expressed a desire to make it happen. Although the pope is not exactly a hometown hero, many of the country's faithful remain eager for a papal visit.

Inside the Vatican, there are tentative discussions about a trip in either September or November, just before or after the pope's much-anticipated second session of the synod on synodality. But at 87 years old and in declining health, there are the obvious tensions between the physical demands such a trip would place on the pope and the reality that this could be the final chance for it to happen.

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Prior to his official meeting with Francis on Feb. 12, Milei will also attend the Feb. 11 canonization of Maria Antonia de Paz y Figueroa. The nun affectionately known as "Mama Antula" is set to become Argentina's first female saint.

As Brazilian journalist Mirticeli Medeiros observed, Milei's decision to attend the Vatican ceremony will mark a stark contrast to when then-Brazilian President Jair

Bolsonaro forewent the 2019 canonization of Brazil's first female saint, Dulce Lopes Pontes.

Despite being the president of the world's most Catholic country, Bolsonaro never met with Francis. Milei's arrival at the Vatican — hat in hand — sends a strong signal he's choosing a different course.

And despite being the unlikeliest of bedfellows, these two Argentines with wildly different politics and persuasions might be able to put their own differences aside for God and for country.