Vatican

Vatican News



In this image distributed by Vatican Media, Argentine President Javier Milei, left, cheers at Pope Francis as they meet in the pontiff's studio at The Vatican for a private audience Feb. 12, 2024. (Vatican Media via AP, HO)

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Rome — February 12, 2024

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Despite their rocky start, Argentina's President Javier Milei and Pope Francis appeared to have hit it off as they held their first meeting Feb. 12 amid speculation that the Argentine pontiff might finally go home for a visit later this year.

The Vatican said the two men met for an hour and 10 minutes, an unusually long audience by Francis' standards, especially given no translation was required. Vatican video showed a smiling Francis briefly grasping Milei's arm for support as they walked to his desk at the start of their meeting.

Milei, who once called the pope an "imbecile," gave Francis some of his favorite Argentine dulce de leche alfajor cookies and lemon biscuits. Francis presented him with the documents of his papacy and a medallion.

"One of the things that I've come to understand, among other things, is that the pope is the Argentine who is the most important person in the country," Milei said in an interview broadcast Feb. 12 by Italy's Retequattro.

A warm tone was already set the previous day, when Milei embraced Francis with a bear hug at the end of a Mass to declare Argentina's first female saint. A beaming pope quipped, "You cut your hair!"

Milei's office posted photos of the embrace on X and wrote: "May God bless Argentines and may the forces of heaven accompany us."

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It wasn't always so. Milei, a self-proclaimed libertarian and anarcho-capitalist who is promising a wave of austerity measures to revive Argentina's economy, described Francis as an "imbecile" during the election campaign that brought him to office. He called Francis "the representative of malignance on Earth."

Francis, who has also lamented Argentina's prolonged economic crisis, appeared to have forgiven him and brushed off the criticism as mere campaign rhetoric.

Milei said as much in his interview with Retequattro. Describing himself as a Catholic who also practices Jewish rituals, he said he now understood that Francis was the

leader of the world's Catholics and represents an important institution in a largely Catholic country like Argentina.

"As a result, I had to reconsider some positions, and starting from that moment, we began to build a positive relationship," Milei was quoted as saying, according to excerpts of the interview.

As recently as last month the 87-year-old pontiff repeated his hope to visit Argentina later this year for the first time since his 2013 election. His decadelong absence from his homeland, despite having visited neighboring countries such as Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay and Chile during his pontificate, has befuddled Argentines and others alike.

Milei invited Francis to visit, and the country's bishops have similarly pressed for him to finally come home.

"Regarding the pope, he is invited, he is Argentinian and he will come for sure but I don't know when," Argentine Foreign Minister Diana Mondino told reporters when asked by reporters at the Italian foreign ministry.

The Vatican made no mention of a possible visit in a statement released after the Francis-Milei meeting. The statement, which focused only on Milei's subsequent encounter with the Vatican secretary of state, said those talks covered the government's "program to counter the economic crisis" as well as unspecified international conflicts.

Later Monday, Milei met with Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni and President Sergio Mattarella. Meloni wrote on X, formerly Twitter, that they discussed boosting economic ties in the energy, infrastructure and agroalimentary industries.

Milei had reason to be pleased going into the audience. Overnight, Israeli forces freed two hostages with Argentine citizenship who had been kidnapped by Hamas on Oct. 7. Milei arrived in Rome Feb. 9 after a visit to Israel where he spent time with the Argentine community.

In a message on X, his office thanked Israeli forces for the rescue.