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Pope Francis gives U.S. President Joe Biden a thumbs-up during a private meeting on the margins of the G7 summit in Borgo Egnazia, in Italy's southern Puglia region, June 14. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis met with U.S. President Joe Biden in a private meeting on June 14, where the two leaders discussed the "urgent need for an immediate ceasefire" in Gaza and the release of Israeli hostages.

The meeting, which took place on the sidelines of the June 13-15 G7 summit of world leaders in Southern Italy, comes nearly three years after Biden and Francis' last in-person meeting in 2021 and just five months before American voters will head to the polls to decide whether to reelect the U.S. president for a second term in office.

While the meeting was closed to the press, a White House read-out said that the president also thanked the pope for his efforts to address "the humanitarian impacts of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine."

"President Biden also reaffirmed his deep appreciation for the Pope's tireless advocacy for the poor and those suffering from persecution, the effects of climate change, and conflict around the world," the statement concluded.

The Vatican, which has been scarce in its release of any information during the pope's half-day visit to the summit, has yet to issue any official statement.

The two men share a history that predates Biden's tenure as president, having first met when, in 2013, Biden was vice president and led the U.S. delegation that attended Francis' inauguration as pope. In 2015, during Francis' visit to the United States, the pope met privately with the Biden family to console them after the loss of the vice president's son, Beau Biden.

"I wish every grieving parent, brother, sister, mother, father would have the benefit of his words, his prayer, his presence," Biden said afterward. "He provided us with more comfort than even he, I think, will ever understand."

When they met at the Vatican in 2021, soon after Biden's election as the nation's second Catholic president, the encounter between the two men lasted some 75

minutes, in what is still believed to be the longest meeting between Francis and a head of state.

At the time, the president praised Francis as "the most significant warrior for peace I've ever met."

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Since then, however, the U.S. administration and the Holy See have found themselves at odds over the wars in Gaza and Ukraine.

While Francis has condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he has also made several statements suggesting that Ukraine should seek to negotiate an immediate peace deal. The Biden administration, however, has strongly denounced any effort to rush any negotiations that does not guarantee Ukraine its full territorial sovereignty.

Despite the differences in approaches, the Vatican has been actively partnering with the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, Joe Donnelly, to work toward the repatriation of an estimated 20,000 Ukrainian children who have been abducted to Russia since the start of the war. Last July, Biden held a rare Oval Office meeting with the pope's special peace envoy, Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, to discuss the joint initiative and the White House readout of the June 14 meeting said the two men again discussed those efforts.

On Gaza, Francis has repeatedly called for a cease-fire in Gaza following Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks on Israel last year, while the Biden administration has remained ironclad in its support of Israel as it laid siege to Gaza, including the recent sale of more than $1 billion in arms to Israel. Only recently has Biden begun to advocate for a cease-fire.

Despite the underlying tensions, both Biden and Francis immediately smiled as they first briefly greeted one another earlier during the day at the start of Francis' speech to the entire G7 and other world leaders. During that exchange, the two men embraced each other warmly and Biden appeared to take notes during the pontiff's speech on artificial intelligence.

During their private meeting, Biden gave the pope a ceramic painting reproduction of the fresco visible through the oculus of the dome of the U.S. Capitol rotunda. In a video clip released to the press, Biden joked that "It's not the Vatican, but ...!," as

the onlooking interpreters laughed.

Before parting ways, the pope is seen telling Biden "pray for me. I pray for you."

"I promise I do," the president replied.



Pope Francis and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, with a priest serving as interpreter, meet privately on the margins of the G7 summit in Borgo Egnazia, Italy, June 14. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Prior to addressing the full summit, Francis also met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The two last met at the Vatican in May 2023, and in a social media post following their June 14 meeting, Zelenskyy said he informed the pope about "the consequences of Russian aggression, its air terror, and the difficult energy situation."

According to Zelenskyy, the two men also discussed the upcoming international Ukrainian peace summit that will take place June 15-16 in Bürgenstock, Switzerland, and will be attended by the Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin.

The G7 address and bilateral meetings capped off a marathon day for the 87-year-old pontiff, one that began with a high-profile meeting with comedians at the Vatican before he flew via helicopter to the Italian region of Puglia for the G7 summit.

During the Vatican encounter with the comics, the pope told the likes of Whoopi Goldberg, Stephen Colbert, Chris Rock, Jimmy Fallon, Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Jim Gaffigan that their penchant for laughter was a gift for a world where there was "so much gloomy news."

By the end of the day, that reality was brought into sharp focus with the pope meeting a number of heads of state who face wars and crises of democracy back at home.

During a roundtable summit on artificial intelligence, which was the primary purpose of his trip to the G7, Francis told the world leaders gathered in Italy they must use their power in service of the common good and to engage in much needed "healthy politics."

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