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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy presents Pope Francis with a gift during a meeting at the Vatican Oct. 11, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met for the third time since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, focusing their discussion on the repatriation of Ukrainian nationals held in Russian captivity.

"The issue of bringing our people home from captivity was the main focus of my meeting with Pope Francis," Zelenskyy posted on X after the Oct. 11 meeting at the Vatican. "We are counting on the Holy See's assistance in helping to bring back Ukrainians who have been taken captive by Russia."

In Rome as part of a 36-hour tour of Europe, which included stops in the United Kingdom, France and Germany, Zelenskyy visited the Vatican the morning after meeting with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

His meeting with the pope in the library of the Apostolic Palace lasted 35 minutes and was followed by discussions with officials from the Vatican Secretariat of State. According to a Vatican statement issued after the meetings, the talks covered "the state of the war and the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, as well as the ways in which it could be brought to an end, leading to just and stable peace in the country."

"In addition, some matters relating to the religious life of the country were examined," the statement continued.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, visited Ukraine in July and met with Zelenskyy; the cardinal and Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, Vatican foreign minister, met with the president after his meeting with the pope.

Without making specific mention of Ukraine, a post from Francis' account on X following the meeting stated that "all nations have the right to exist in peace and security. Their territories must not be attacked, and their sovereignty must be respected and guaranteed through peace and dialogue."

Francis and Zelenskyy last met in southern Italy June 14 on the sidelines of the Group of Seven summit. Zelenskyy had also met with the pope at the Vatican in May 2023 and, in February 2020, before Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine.

While Francis and Vatican officials have previously expressed the Holy See's willingness to act as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine, Zelenskyy has publicly enlisted the Vatican's support in arranging the return of Ukrainian civilians captured by Russia.

After Russia released 10 prisoners in June, including two priests, the Ukrainian president publicly recognized the Holy See's efforts in mediating the release in a post on X.

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In his post after the Oct. 11 meeting with the pope, Zelenskyy noted the death of Ukrainian journalist Viktoria Roshchyna in Russian captivity reported by officials in Kyiv. "Many other journalists, public figures, community heads from occupied territories, and ordinary people who were captured during the Russian occupation remain in Russian captivity," he wrote on X.

Francis confirmed in April 2023 that the Holy See had acted as an intermediary in several prisoner exchange negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi of Bologna was appointed by the pope to serve as his peace envoy for Ukraine and has been working to secure the return of Ukrainian children taken into Russia.

As he did during his visit in May 2023, Zelenskyy presented the pope with a gift highlighting the plight of Ukrainian children affected by the war. He gave the pope an oil painting Oct. 11 titled, "The Bucha Massacre. Marichka's Story," depicting a young girl found amid the devastation in the Ukrainian city of Bucha. During his previous visit, Zelenskyy gave the pope a poster resembling a Marian image with a dark figure where the child Jesus would normally be to commemorate the 243

children who died during the first 58 days of Russia's full-scale invasion.

In return, the pope gave the president a bronze sculpture depicting a flower budding between bricks and inscribed with the words, "Peace is a fragile flower," as well as a book on Ukrainian Catholics persecuted during the Soviet era.

Francis had met Oct. 10 with Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, who is in Rome participating in the Synod of Bishops on synodality. The pope told Shevchuk that he would continue to "use all of the Holy See's diplomatic tools to end the war in Ukraine." The archbishop, in turn, told Francis that some Russians were promoting the "militarization of religion," and he thanked him for his continued efforts to arrange prisoner releases, according to a statement from the archbishop's office.

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