Vatican

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Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi of Bologna, center left, and a Vatican delegation meet with Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, head of external church relations for the Moscow Patriarchate, in Moscow Oct. 16, 2024. (CNS/courtesy of Russian Orthodox Church, Department for External Church Relations)

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Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi of Bologna, Pope Francis' envoy for peace in Ukraine, returned to Moscow in mid-October for meetings with Russian government officials and leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The cardinal began his visit to Moscow Oct. 15 "to meet with authorities and assess further efforts to facilitate the family reunification of Ukrainian children" forcibly taken to Russia "and the exchange of prisoners, with a view to achieving the much hoped-for peace," said Matteo Bruni, director of the Vatican press office.

Zuppi had traveled to Moscow in June 2023 as well.

The cardinal's first meeting Oct. 15 was with Sergey Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister. A statement on the foreign ministry's website said, "The parties had an in-depth discussion on cooperation in the humanitarian sphere in the context of the conflict around Ukraine and touched upon a number of topical issues on the bilateral and international agenda."

According to Vatican News, Zuppi met Oct. 16 with Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's commissioner for children's rights. In March 2023 the International Criminal Court in The Hague issued an arrest warrant for Lvova-Belova and Russian President Vladimir Putin, accusing them of violating international law by taking thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia.

The Ukrainian government's Children of War website estimates that as of Oct. 16, more than 19,500 children have been "deported or forcibly displaced" from Ukraine and only 388 have been returned.

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Zuppi, accompanied by Archbishop Giovanni D'Aniello, the papal nuncio to Russia, also met Oct. 16 with Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, head

of external church relations for the Moscow Patriarchate.

"During the conversation, the parties discussed humanitarian problems related to the conflict in Ukraine, as well as other issues of mutual interest," said a statement from Metropolitan Anthony's office.

Zuppi left the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican to travel to Russia four days after Francis met at the Vatican with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who said his conversation with the pope focused on "bringing our people home from captivity."

"We are counting on the Holy See's assistance in helping to bring back Ukrainians who have been taken captive by Russia," Zelenskyy had posted on X Oct. 11.

After reciting the Angelus prayer Oct. 14, Francis also pleaded publicly with Russia to "stop the airstrikes against the civilian population, which is always the most affected. Stop the killing of innocent people!"

And he specifically asked "for the Ukrainians not to be left to freeze to death" due to Russia's destruction of power plants and gas supply lines as winter approaches.

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