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Pope Francis gives U.S. President Joe Biden a thumbs up during a private meeting on the margins of the Group of Seven summit in Borgo Egnazia, in Italy's southern Puglia region, June 14, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis on Dec. 19 spoke with U.S. President Joe Biden by phone, ahead of a White House announcement that the two men will hold a final meeting at the Vatican next month before Biden leaves office.

The two leaders discussed efforts to "advance peace around the world during the holiday season," said a White House readout of the call.

"The President thanked the Pope for his continued advocacy to alleviate global suffering, including his work to advance human rights and protect religious freedoms," the statement continued.

Biden will meet with Francis at the Vatican on Jan. 10, as part of his Jan. 9-12 visit to Italy. The outgoing U.S. President will also meet with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia

Meloni and President Sergio Mattarella.

When the pope and president meet next month, it will mark their third in-person encounter since Biden took office in 2021.

Biden's October visit to Germany was widely expected to be his last visit to Europe before leaving office on Jan. 20. But the nation's second Catholic president has long expressed his admiration for the pope pre-dating his presidency.

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. And when the then-newly elected president met the pope at the Vatican in 2021, Biden praised Francis as "the most significant warrior for peace I've ever met."

The two men last met in June of this year on the sidelines of the G7 summit in southern Italy. At the time, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza topped their agenda. As the Holy See continues its push for a global ceasefire, those conflicts are again expected to be a central part of the pope and president's meeting.

But as the clock ticks on the final days of the Biden presidency, the pope may also have another goal in mind at this audience: the commutation of the sentences of the 40 inmates currently on federal death row in the United States.

Earlier this month, Francis made a targeted appeal during his weekly Sunday Angelus prayer that their lives be spared.

"Let us pray for their sentence to be commuted, changed," prayed the pope. "Let us think of these brothers and sisters of ours and ask the Lord to save them from death."

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