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by OSV News

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President Joe Biden has canceled his upcoming trip to Italy, including an audience with Pope Francis, in order to "remain focused on directing the full federal response" in the wake of the devastating wildfires raging in California, the White House said.

A statement from White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, posted late Jan. 8, announced that Biden had made the decision to cancel the trip "after returning this evening from Los Angeles, where earlier today he had met with police, fire and emergency personnel fighting the historic fire."

Biden was scheduled to travel to Rome from Jan. 9-12, the White House had announced in December, with an audience with Pope Francis scheduled for Jan. 10. He was also scheduled to meet with Italian President Sergio Mattarella and Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. Biden's audience with Francis was to focus on "efforts to advance peace around the world," the White House said Dec. 19.

The trip would have marked the final foreign trip of Biden's presidency, as he prepares to end his single term in the White House on Jan. 20.

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Biden last met with Francis at the Group of Seven summit in Puglia, Italy, June 14, where they had a brief private bilateral meeting, according to Catholic News Service. Prior to that meeting, the two met at the Vatican Oct. 29, 2021, when Biden "thanked His Holiness for his advocacy for the world's poor and those suffering from hunger, conflict, and persecution," according to the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See. He also "lauded Pope Francis' leadership in fighting the climate crisis, as well as his advocacy to ensure the pandemic ends for everyone through vaccine sharing and an equitable global economic recovery," the embassy said.

The pair spoke by telephone in December, and shortly after that call, Biden commuted the sentences of 37 of the 40 individuals on federal death row to life sentences without the possibility of parole. Francis and other Catholic opponents of the death penalty had sought such action.

Biden on Jan. 9 will deliver a eulogy for the late President Jimmy Carter at his state funeral in Washington.