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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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January 11, 2025
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President Joe Biden has awarded Pope Francis the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States' highest civilian honor.

The award was presented to the pope during a phone call on Jan. 11. The president had originally been scheduled to meet with the pope at the Vatican today, but was forced to cancel his trip to oversee the federal response to the California wildfires.

The honor was conferred upon the pope with distinction, the first time Biden has granted the award with the status.

In the official White House citation, Biden praised Francis, the first pontiff from the Southern Hemisphere, as "unlike any who came before."

"A loving pastor, he joyfully answers children's questions about God. A challenging teacher, he commands us to fight for peace and protect the planet," read the citation. "Above all, he is the People's Pope – a light of faith, hope, and love that shines brightly across the world."

In a photo released by the White House, Cardinal Christophe Pierre — the Vatican's ambassador to the United States — is seen standing next to the president in the Oval Office.

The Presidential Medal of Freedom, a tradition that dates back to 1963, is presented to individuals "who have made exemplary contributions to the prosperity, values, or security of the United States, world peace, or other significant societal, public or private endeavors."

In 2004, Pope John Paul II was presented the honor by President George W. Bush and in 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson posthumously awarded Pope John XXIII with the medal.

Biden has held two in-person meetings with Francis since becoming the nation's second Catholic president, but has a history with the pope that predates his tenure as president.

In 2021, Biden praised Francis as "the most significant warrior for peace I've ever met."