Opinion
Guest Voices

Pallbearers carry the body of Pope Francis

Pallbearers carry the body of Pope Francis through St. Peter's Square on their way into St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on April 23, 2025. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

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Political and religious representatives from all over the world — including U.S. President Donald Trump — will come to the Vatican on Saturday (April 26) to pay their final respects to Pope Francis, who will be remembered not only for his emphasis on the poor, but also for his peacekeeping and diplomacy efforts during his pontificate.

"The funeral highlights the moral stature of Pope Francis that the entire world recognizes as extraordinary," said Massimo Borghesi, a philosophy professor at the University of Perugia and author of a biography on Francis, *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio's Intellectual Journey*.

The A-list of global political representatives attending the funeral will highlight "the role and importance of the Catholic Church on the world stage," Borghesi said. Under Pope Francis, "the Holy See has developed its network of relations with all countries and religions, which is also a resource for the United States," he added.

Trump announced on Truth Social on Monday that he and his wife, Melania, who is Catholic, will attend the solemn ceremony to be held in front of St. Peter's Basilica. "We look forward to being there!" he posted the day Francis died and before the Vatican had announced an official date for the funeral. Given the often-tense relationship that existed between Trump and Francis, best summarized in the late pontiff's appeal to "build bridges, not walls," the president's eagerness to attend the funeral was unexpected for some. After Trump's second election, Francis referred to Trump's mass deportation plans as "disgraceful."

"The fact that he decided to come to the funeral with his wife Melania seems also like a political choice," Borghesi said, pointing to the importance of the Catholic vote in the most recent election and the Vatican's influence in international diplomacy. As the cardinals prepare to select the next pontiff, Trump attending the funeral "allows him to present himself to the Catholic electorship in the U.S. as a president who is close to the church," he added, and his desire "to be available for a meeting with a future pope."

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine said he would be present at the funeral in a post remembering Francis' repeated appeals for peace in his country. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who met with Pope Francis on several occasions, said he would not attend the ceremony but praised Francis as "a faithful servant of Christian doctrine, a wise religious statesman, and a consistent defender of the important values of humanism and justice," in a statement published on Telegram by the Kremlin on Monday.

When war broke out after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Francis broke protocol and rushed to the Russian Embassy to the Holy See to beseech peace. He selected a peace envoy, the proven mediator Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, to attempt to negotiate a ceasefire between the warring nations.

Cardinal Kevin J. Farrell incenses the body of Pope Francis

U.S. Cardinal Kevin J. Farrell, camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church, incenses the body of Pope Francis in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on April 23, 2025. The

pope, in an open casket, will lie in state for public viewing and prayer for three days ahead of his funeral Mass on April 26. (CNS/Paolo Galosi)

Peace among nations was a central theme of Francis' blessing to the Catholic faithful around the globe on Easter Sunday, the day before he died.

"The suffering that has marked the final part of my life, I offer to the Lord, for peace in the world and for fraternity among peoples," the ailing pope wrote in his *Urbi et Orbi*, his last public message to the world. Francis wrote the message but was too weak to read it himself.

International diplomacy, especially in countries at war, was at the heart of the conversation Vice President JD Vance, a self-described "baby Catholic" and convert, had with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state, on Saturday. The day after, on Easter Sunday, Vance was the last government official to meet with the pope in person in his home at the Vatican, despite Vance and Francis having had a public disagreement on migration policies.

Parolin, who worked closely with Pope Francis throughout his pontificate, is considered "*papabile*," meaning a likely choice to succeed Francis as pontiff.

The United States under Trump has pushed for a ceasefire between the warring factions by applying pressure on the Ukrainian president to surrender his expectations for peace and surrender territory to Russia. While the Vatican has encouraged parties to seek a "just peace," Francis also called on Ukraine to embrace "the courage of the white flag" in an interview last year.

At Francis' funeral, Trump will also stand shoulder to shoulder with many European representatives, who have challenged his decision to impose tariffs on foreign nations and his policy to withhold U.S. military support to NATO. French President Emmanuel Macron, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and outgoing German Chancellor Olaf Scholz will be in attendance, as well as leaders from Poland, Hungary, Romania and Switzerland.

The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the president of the European Council, Antonio Costa, will also be present. While tensions will no doubt bubble beneath the surface, Vatican diplomacy expert Victor Gaetan believes the gathering of world leaders will likely be no more than "a photo op."

"There will not be a substantial conversation between Trump and the European leaders," said Gaetan, author of the 2021 book *God's Diplomats: Pope Francis, Vatican Diplomacy and America's Armageddon*. Instead, he added, the funeral will showcase the breadth of Pope Francis' influence among the world's governments and religions.

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