Vatican

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Donald Trump meet in St. Peter's Basilica ahead of the funeral of Pope Francis at the Vatican April 26, 2025. (OSV News/Ukrainian Presidential Press Service handout via Reuters)



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For centuries, the Vatican's diplomatic corps has worked quietly behind the scenes in the effort to promote peace throughout the world, often acting as secret liaison between nations and silent emissaries between embattled world leaders.

On Saturday (April 26), the Vatican's role in global diplomacy was on breathtaking, full display for the world to see in the home of the Catholic Church in one of its most holy places: St. Peter's Basilica.

U.S. President Donald Trump met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for 15 minutes just prior to the funeral of Pope Francis, who spent a lifetime as a cleric working to build bridges.

"Nothing like some tough diplomacy in one of the most beautiful places in the world," tweeted Mike Waltz, Trump's national security adviser, on the platform now known as X.

Photos of the encounter went viral. Scant details about the exchange were released. The images show Trump and Zelenskyy seated in padded chairs near the front doors of the marble-floored nave of the basilica, near the baptistry chapel.

A White House spokesman said the meeting was productive.

Zelenskyy praised the meeting afterward, and Trump seemed to change his tune, blasting a recent Russian aerial assault on Ukraine.

"Good meeting," Zelynskyy posted on X. "We discussed a lot one on one. Hoping for results on everything we covered. Protecting lives of our people. Full and unconditional ceasefire."

It was Trump and Zelnenskyy's first face-to-face meeting since a fiery exchange broadcast live from the White House in February. In recent days, the Trump administration has been pressuring Zelenskyy to accept the administration's peace deal terms in the three-year-old Russia-Ukraine war.

After Trump was seated for the funeral, he was immediately followed out of the basilica by Zelenskyy.

Francis, who repeatedly called for a cease fire in Ukraine, could not have planned the basilica exchange better if he had been alive.

Then, as if to place an emphasis on the meeting, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re in his pre-written funeral homily, discussed the 12-year Francis papacy's efforts to bring together people in conflict.

"Faced with the raging wars of recent years, with their inhuman horrors and countless deaths and destruction, Pope Francis incessantly raised his voice imploring peace and calling for reason and honest negotiation to find possible solutions," Cardinal Re said in Italian.

Quoting Francis, Re added, "War, he said, results in the death of people and the destruction of homes, hospitals and schools. War always leaves the world worse than it was before: it is always a painful and tragic defeat for everyone."

With Zelenskyy and Trump seated before him at the front of St. Peter's Square, and as the homily came to a close, Re said, " 'Build bridges, not walls' was an exhortation he repeated many times."



Fourteen pallbearers carry the casket of Pope Francis past world leaders, including U.S. President Donald Trump, center, at the end of the pope's funeral Mass April 26, 2025, in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

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Francis was not alone among pontiffs at promoting peace over the centuries, wrote Victor Gaetan, author of *God's Diplomats*, a 2021 book about the Holy See's sprawling network of lay and religious people. In addition to peacemaking, Vatican diplomats, called nuncios, also gather information and cultivate relationships with most of the world's governments.

One fact underscores the experience of the Vatican's diplomatic corps: The Holy See operates the oldest training institute for professional diplomats in the world, the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, created in 1701.

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin is the Holy See's top diplomat and a leading candidate to replace Francis.

After the Zelenskyy meeting, Trump seemed to pivot, posting on his social media platform, Truth Social, a harsh criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin after Russia's recent 11-hour missile and drone attack on Ukraine's capital Kyiv.



Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy, right, President Donald Trump, French President Emmanuel Macron, left, and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer near a front door of St. Peter's before Pope Francis' funeral on April 26.(Ukrainian Presidential Press Office via AP)

"There was no reason for Putin to be shooting missiles into civilian areas, cities and towns, over the last few days," Trump posted. "It makes me think that maybe he doesn't want to stop the war, he's just tapping me along, and has to be dealt with differently, through 'Banking' or 'Secondary Sanctions?' Too many people are dying!!!"

The Ukrainian president's office later released a photo showing British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron with Trump and Zelensky inside the basilica. In one photo, Starmer and Zelenskyy's eyes are locked, Macron has his hand on Zelenskyy's shoulder as Trump leans in.

Mountain Butorac, a pilgrimage organizer from Atlanta who now lives in Rome, told the National Catholic Reporter on Saturday that the photos of the impromptu meeting between Trump and Zelenskyy clearly were captured next to the chapel where people are baptized. Butorac said the symbolism of the baptismal chapel was noteworthy.

Writing on social media, where he posts under the handle TheCatholicTraveler, Butorac said, "It was a chance for rebirth, forgiveness, and new life at the funeral of the Holy Father who pushed for peace until his last breath."

This story appears in the **The Funeral of Pope Francis** and **Trump's Second Term** feature series.