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Pope Leo XIV waves at the end of his first weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at The Vatican, Wednesday, May 21, 2025. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Pope Leo XIV called Wednesday for humanitarian aid to reach the Gaza Strip and for an end to the "heartbreaking" toll on its people, as he presided over his first general audience in St. Peter's Square.

The Vatican said that around 40,000 people were on hand for the audience, which came just days after an estimated 200,000 people attended the inaugural Mass on Sunday for history's first American pope.

Related: Pope Francis' popemobile hasn't arrived in Gaza yet. Neither has relief from death, hunger and war.

Leo, the former Cardinal Robert Prevost of Chicago, began the audience with a tour through the piazza in the popemobile and stopped to bless several babies. In addressing specific greetings to different groups of pilgrims, Leo spoke in his native English, his fluent Spanish as well as the traditional Italian of the papacy.

"I renew my heartfelt appeal to allow the entrance of dignified humanitarian aid to Gaza and to put an end to the hostilities whose heartbreaking price is being paid by children, the elderly and sick people," he said.

The general audience on Wednesdays is a weekly appointment that popes have kept for decades to allow ordinary faithful to have a face-to-face encounter with the pontiff. It features the pope delivering a brief reflection on a theme or Scripture passage, with summaries provided by others in different languages and the pope directing specific messages to particular faith groups.

The encounter, which lasts more than an hour, usually ends with a brief topical appeal by the pope about a current issue or upcoming event. Leo began it with his now-frequent mantra "Peace be with you."

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To that end, Leo on Tuesday reaffirmed the Vatican's willingness to host the next round of ceasefire talks between Russia and Ukraine during a phone call with Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, the Italian leader's office said.

Meloni made the call after speaking with U.S. President Donald Trump and other European leaders, who asked her to verify the Holy See's offer.

"Finding in the Holy Father the confirmation of the willingness to welcome the next talks between the parties, the premier expressed profound gratitude for Pope Leo XIV's willingness and his incessant commitment in favor of peace," Meloni's office said in a statement late Tuesday.

Trump had referred to the Vatican's longstanding offer to host talks in reporting on his phone call Monday with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

While low-level talks could take place in Rome, Italy would be hard-pressed to allow Putin to fly into Rome for any higher-level negotiation. Putin is subject to an international arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court, of which Italy is a founding member and therefore obliged to execute its warrants.

This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** feature series. View the full series.