Vatican

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Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, left, and Pope Leo XIV wave to journalists during their meeting in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Wednesday, July 9, 2025. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

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CASTEL GANDOLFO, Italy — July 9, 2025

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Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with Pope Leo XIV on Wednesday and thanked him for the Vatican's efforts to help return children taken by Russia. Both he and Leo suggested the Vatican could host peace talks to end the war.

Zelenskyy called on Leo at the papal summer retreat in Castel Gandolfo, in the Alban hills south of Rome. Zelenskyy is in Rome to attend the fourth Ukraine Recovery Conference, which is taking place Thursday and Friday.

The Vatican said Leo and Zelenskyy discussed the conflict "and the urgent need for a just and lasting peace."

"The Holy Father expressed his sorrow for the victims and renewed his prayers and closeness to the Ukrainian people, encouraging every effort aimed at the release of prisoners and the search for shared solutions," a Vatican statement said. "The Holy Father reiterated the willingness to welcome representatives of Russia and Ukraine to the Vatican for negotiations."

The United States had indicated the Vatican could host possible peace talks between Ukraine and Russia, but Moscow hasn't accepted it.

Speaking to reporters as he left the pope's villa, Zelenskyy said he thanked the American pope for the Vatican's efforts to help reunite children taken by Russia after Moscow's 2022 invasion.

He asked for continued help and prayers "to get back our children stolen by Russia during this war."

Pope Francis had named an envoy, Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, to try to facilitate the return of children and find "paths to peace" between the two sides. After an initial burst of shuttle diplomacy and visits to Kyiv, Moscow, Washington and Beijing, Zuppi's efforts appear to have slowed, at least in the public sphere.

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The Russian government has faced international condemnation over unlawful deportations of Ukrainian families, including children, to Russia following Putin's

order for Russian troops to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022. U.N.-backed experts have estimated that about 20,000 Ukrainian children have been forcibly deported or transferred from occupied areas of Ukraine to Russia, though it was difficult to determine exact numbers.

The Vatican has not disclosed details about its efforts on helping the return of the Ukrainian children or how many children have been returned.

Leo has been a strong supporter of Ukraine and denounced the "senseless war," meeting recently with the Ukrainian Greek Catholic bishops and pilgrims. He was so taken by their hauntingly beautiful Ukrainian version of the "Our Father" hymn that he asked for an encore when he met with them a second time.

"It is not easy to find words of consolation for the families who have lost loved ones in this senseless war," he told the bishops who visited last week. "I imagine it is also for you, who are in daily contact with people wounded in heart and flesh."

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.