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Pope Leo XIV poses for a photo with Brian Burch, the new U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, th

Pope Leo XIV poses for a photo with Brian Burch, the new U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, the ambassador's wife, Sara, and their nine children, daughter-in-law and granddaughter in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Sept. 13. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Cindy Wooden

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Pope Leo XIV welcomed Brian Burch, a critic of the late Pope Francis, as the new U.S. ambassador to the Holy See Sept. 13, accepting his letters of credential and a chocolate cake topped with a metallic red sign saying, "Happy Birthday Pope Leo XIV."

Homemade cards for the pope's 70th birthday Sept. 14 sat alongside the cake, apparently made by some of Burch's nine children, who also met the pope.

Burch's audience with the pope had its very formal moments, too, as the 50-year-old ambassador, wearing a black tailcoat, presented Leo with a letter from President Donald Trump introducing Burch as the 13th U.S. ambassador to the Holy See.

Pope Leo and Burch then met privately in the library of the Apostolic Palace.

In a series of posts on X, the embassy described the private meeting as "warm and constructive," saying it including discussion of "an array of global challenges including conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and the war in Gaza."

"They also touched on protecting religious freedom, the Vatican's relationship with China, and the AI revolution," the embassy said.

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The two also spoke about "the tragic assassination of U.S. advocate Charlie Kirk," the embassy said. Kirk, a conservative political activist and founder of the Republican-aligned Turning Point USA, was shot and killed Sept. 10 during a speaking engagement in Orem, Utah.

"Pope Leo underscored that our political differences can never be resolved with violence and told Ambassador Burch that he was praying for the widow of Mr. Kirk and his children," the embassy added.

The ambassador "described the meeting as extraordinarily friendly, like talking to a friend back home in Chicago," the posts continued.

"This ceremony marks an important milestone in the continuing diplomatic relationship between the United States and the Holy See," the U.S. embassy press office said in a brief statement.

Burch also introduced Leo to his wife, Sara, and their nine children, daughter-in-law and granddaughter.

Pope Leo XIV receives the letters of credential of Brian Burch as U.S. ambassador to the Holy

Pope Leo XIV receives the letters of credential of Brian Burch as U.S. ambassador to the Holy See during an audience Sept. 13 in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

In December, even before taking office, Trump announced on Truth Social that he was going to nominate Burch as ambassador to the Vatican.

"Brian is a devout Catholic, a father of nine, and President of CatholicVote. He has received numerous awards, and demonstrated exceptional leadership, helping build one of the largest Catholic advocacy groups in the Country," Trump wrote. Burch "represented me well during the last Election, having garnered more Catholic votes than any Presidential Candidate in History!"

Burch served as president of CatholicVote, a right-leaning political advocacy organization, from 2008 until his nomination as ambassador.

Burch had long expressed criticism of the Francis papacy.

Following Francis' 2023 decision to allow priests to bless individuals in same-sex unions, Burch blasted the pope for creating "confusion" within the Catholic Church. He said that the next pope must "clarify" the confusion of the Francis era.

On other occasions, he criticized Francis' governance for what he characterized as a "pattern of vindictiveness."

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Born July 7, 1975, in Phoenix, Burch earned a bachelor's degree in political philosophy from the University of Dallas. He has lived in Chicago for most of the past 25 years, according to a story on CatholicVote.org.

He was confirmed as ambassador by the U.S. Senate Aug. 2 in a vote of 49-44 along party lines.

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The Vatican and the U.S. government announced the establishment of full diplomatic relations Jan. 10, 1984.

Callista Gingrich served as Trump's ambassador to the Holy See 2017-2020. Joe Donnelly, a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate, served as Vatican ambassador under President Joe Biden. Donnelly stepped down in July 2024.

This story appears in the **Charlie Kirk murder news and commentary** feature series. View the full series.