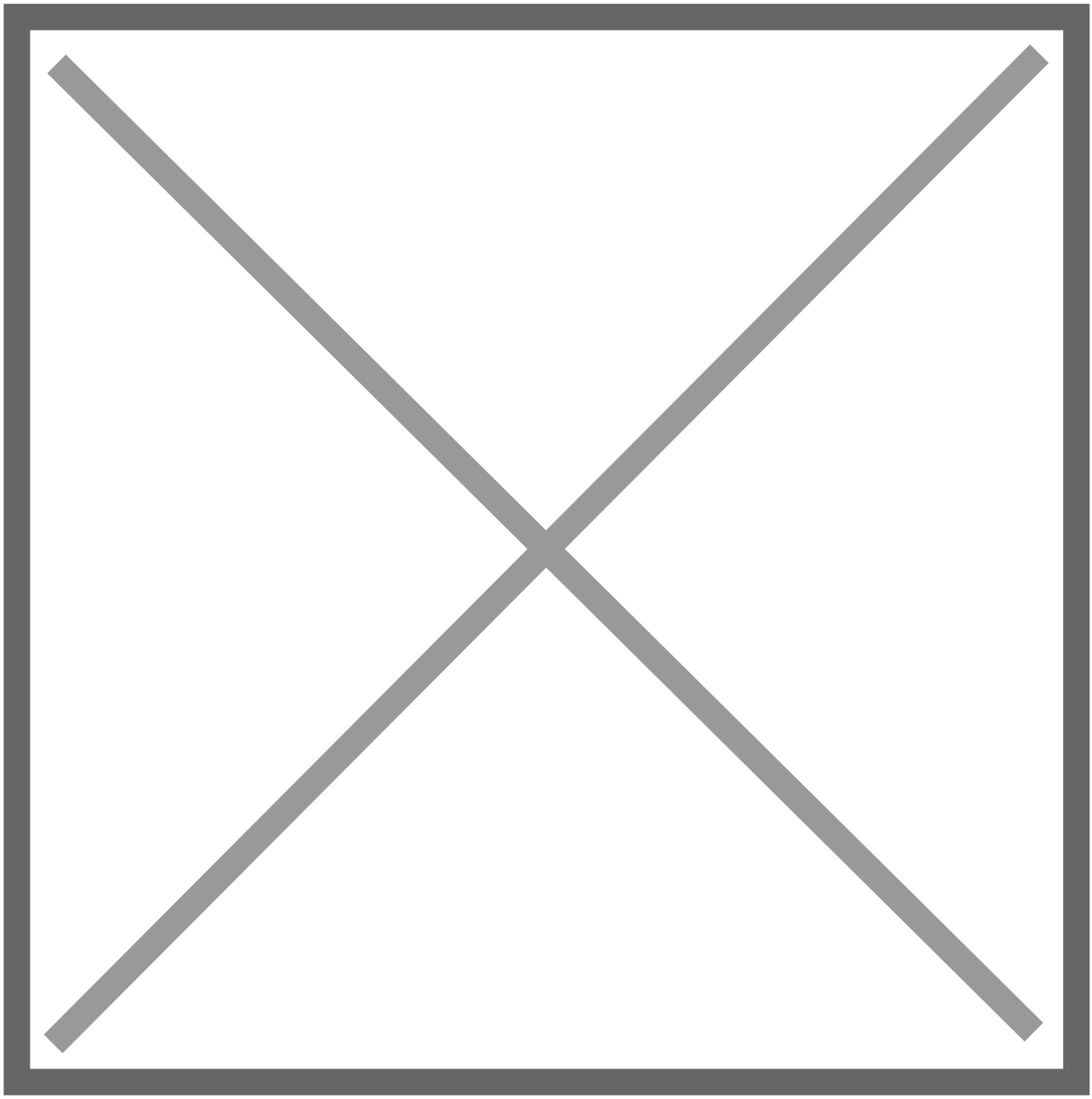
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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy greets Pope Leo XIV during a meeting at the papal residence in Castel Gandolfo Dec. 9, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Pope Leo XIV reiterated the importance of dialogue and his hopes for a just and lasting peace in the region.

"In addition, the questions of prisoners of war and the need to assure the return of Ukrainian children to their families were also discussed," the Vatican press office said in a communique released after the meeting Dec. 9.

The two leaders held their closed-door meeting in the morning at the papal villa in Castel Gandolfo, southeast of Rome; the meeting lasted about 30 minutes.

"During the cordial talks, which focused on the war in Ukraine, the Holy Father reiterated the need for the continuation of dialogue and expressed his urgent desire that the current diplomatic initiatives bring about a just and lasting peace," the Vatican communique said.

During an exchange of gifts, Zelenskyy gave Pope Leo a handmade, traditional Ukrainian-style Nativity scene, according to Vatican News.

Ukraine's ambassador to the Holy See, Andrii Yurash, was part of the five-person delegation and said, "It was a wonderful meeting, very sincere and peaceful," reported Vatican News.

On X, the social media platform, Zelenskyy expressed his appreciation for the support of the pope and the Holy See with its "ongoing humanitarian assistance and the readiness to expand humanitarian missions."

"During today's audience with His Holiness, I thanked him for his constant prayers for Ukraine and for the Ukrainian people, as well as for his calls for a just peace," the president wrote.

He said he told the pope "about diplomatic efforts with the United States to achieve peace," and "we discussed further actions and the Vatican's mediation aimed at returning our children abducted by Russia."

Zelenskyy also invited the pope to visit Ukraine, saying it "would be a powerful signal of support for our people."

The meeting with the pope came after Zelenskyy met British, French and German leaders in London Dec. 8 to bolster support for Ukraine and increase economic pressure on Russian President Vladímir Putin to put an end to the war on his neighbor.

French President Emmanuel Macron's office said the London meeting aimed "to continue joint work on the U.S. plan in order to complement it with European contributions, in close coordination with Ukraine," according to the Associated Press.

Zelenskyy also met Dec. 8 with Mark Rutte, secretary-general of NATO, António Costa, president of the European Council, and Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, at Rutte's official residence in Brussels.

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According to a statement published Dec. 9 on Zelenskyy's official website, president.gov.ua, those leaders "discussed diplomatic work with the U.S. side aimed at achieving a dignified and guaranteed peace" based on a peace process that is "clearly focused on safeguarding its sovereignty and national interests."

"The parties agreed that the framework must clearly specify a date for Ukraine's accession to the European Union," the statement said.

Von der Leyen posted on X that the "EU remains ironclad in its support for Ukraine," adding that "Ukraine's security must be guaranteed, in the long term, as a first line of defence for our Union."

After meeting with European leaders, Zelenskyy was set to share with the United States an update to the original peace plan U.S. President Donald Trump had proposed, which many observers saw as more favorable to Russia.

Zelenskyy told reporters on WhatsApp the new plan removed eight "obvious anti-Ukrainian points" or conditions; however, there was still no consensus on giving up Ukrainian territory to Russia, which the U.S. plan considers necessary for peace, but Ukraine and Europe have opposed.

Zelenskyy's meetings in Western Europe reflect his and other leaders' desire to include Europe in the U.S. peace plan, something the U.S. did not do.

Speaking to reporters on the papal plane from Lebanon to Rome Dec. 2, Leo said, "It is clear that, on the one hand, the president of the United States thinks he can promote a peace plan that he would like to implement and that, at least initially, did not involve Europe."

"However, Europe's presence is actually important, and that initial proposal was modified partly because of what Europe was saying," he said.

"Specifically, I think Italy's role could be very important," he said, "because of Italy's ability to act as an intermediary in a conflict between different parties: Ukraine, Russia, obviously, the United States...."

"I would suggest that the Holy See could also encourage this type of mediation and that we seek together a solution that could truly offer peace, a just peace, in this case in Ukraine," the pope had said.

Zelenskyy was meeting with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni Dec. 9 after his meeting with Leo.

It was the third time Leo and the Ukrainian president sat down together: the first time was briefly after the pope's installation Mass at the Vatican May 18, and then for 30-minute closed-door talks July 9 at the papal villa in Castel Gandolfo.

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