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Pope Leo XIV meets María Corina Machado, Venezuelan opposition leader and 2025 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, during a private audience at the Vatican Jan. 12, 2026. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado asked Pope Leo XIV Monday (Jan. 12) to intervene in freeing political prisoners and advance a democratic transition in the country following the ousting of its president by U.S. forces.

"I asked him to intercede for all Venezuelans who remain kidnapped and missing," Machado said in a statement published by her electoral campaign on X.

The Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who has been living in exile since late 2025, asked the pope "to intercede for the release of more than a thousand political prisoners and for the transition to democracy in Venezuela to move forward without delay," the statement continued.

Rights groups estimate that between 800-900 political prisoners are currently incarcerated in Venezuela with many in harsh conditions, according to The New York Times.

The Vatican listed the private audience on the pope's daily agenda but offered no further details on the conversation. Machado also met with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state who was ambassador to Venezuela from 2009-2013.



Pope Leo XIV meets María Corina Machado, Venezuelan opposition leader and 2025 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, during a private audience at the Vatican Jan. 12, 2026. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The meeting came just over a week after the United States' capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in a raid Jan. 3 that killed some 75 people, according to U.S. government estimates.

The following day, Leo publicly called for Venezuela's sovereignty to be guaranteed and for human rights to be respected in the country.

Machado, a former member of Venezuela's National Assembly and an international symbol of resistance to Maduro, was speculated to lead Venezuela after his ousting, but the United States has since begun working with Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodríguez as the country's acting president.

Machado is expected to meet with U.S. President Donald Trump in Washington in the coming days.

In 2024, she was barred from running in the 2024 Venezuelan presidential election. Her stand-in candidate, Edmundo González, is widely considered to have won the vote by independent observers, but Maduro declared himself the winner and the Venezuelan government failed to publish the vote tallies, as required by law.

Vatican push for diplomatic solution

Leo's meeting with Machado follows revelations that the Vatican played a role in extending a Russian asylum offer to Maduro in the days before his capture by the United States.

Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state, summoned Brian Burch, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, to discuss U.S. plans in Venezuela on Christmas Eve, The Washington Post reported Jan. 9.

During the meeting, the cardinal conveyed a Russian offer of asylum to Burch and urged the United States to delay action in Venezuela to give Maduro time to consider it. The proposal included security guarantees for Maduro and could have been extended to other senior Venezuelan officials, The Post reported.

Parolin also reportedly informed Burch of a rumor that Venezuela had become a "set piece" in Russia-Ukraine negotiations that Moscow could give up for favorable terms on Ukraine.

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Yet a week later Maduro was captured by U.S. forces and taken to New York, where he is awaiting trial at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn on drug trafficking charges.

"It is disappointing that parts of a confidential conversation were disclosed that do not accurately reflect the content of the conversation itself, which took place during the Christmas period," the Vatican press office said in a statement to The Post published in their article.

Leo had previously said in December that the United States should find "another way" to push for regime change in Venezuela, stating that it is "better to look for ways of dialogue, maybe pressure, including economic pressure."

And in his "state of the world" address to ambassadors Jan. 9, the pope called on the international community to "respect the will of the Venezuelan people, and to safeguard the human and civil rights of all, ensuring a future of stability and concord."

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