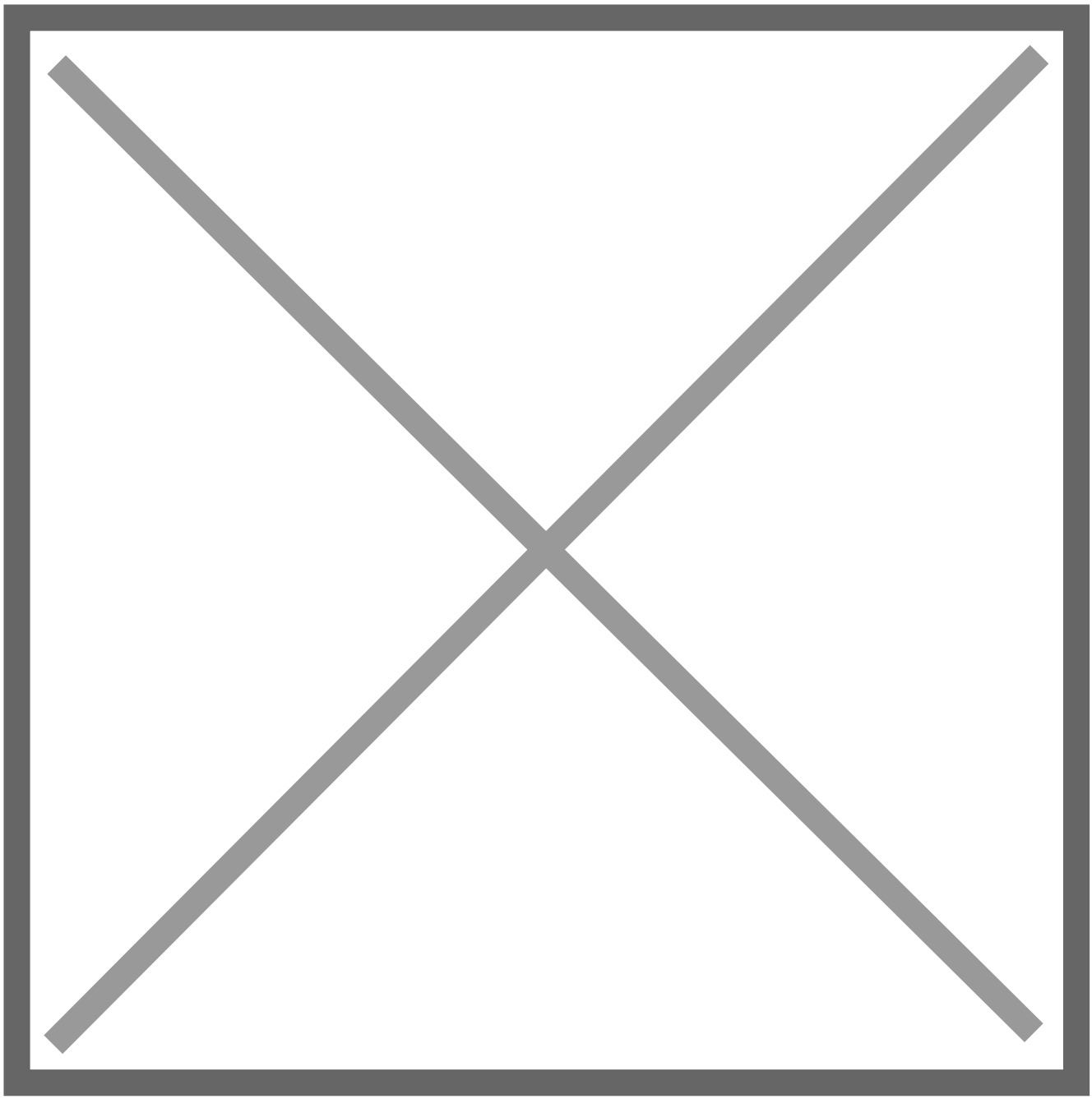
News



Then-U.S. President Barack Obama looks on as Pope Francis signs a copy of an encyclical at the White House in Washington Sept. 23, 2015. (OSV News/L'Osservatore Romano handout via Reuters)



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Former President Barack Obama said in a YouTube interview posted Feb. 14 he wants to meet Pope Leo XIV. Left-leaning political YouTuber and podcaster Brian Tyler Cohen asked who the former president most wanted to meet at the end of a wide-ranging Q&A that began with the topic of a controversial racist social media post that portrayed him and his wife, former first lady Michelle Obama, as apes.

Obama answered that he wanted to meet the pope, "and I hope I get an opportunity sometime in the future."

Obama, whose second term ended in 2017 when President Donald Trump entered his first term in office, pointed out that Leo is a fellow White Sox fan and from Chicago, like himself. Originally from Hawaii, Obama made Chicago home after college and taught at the University of Chicago Law School on the city's South Side — where the White Sox play — and has continued to celebrate that part of the city, even establishing his presidential library there.

Leo grew up in Chicago's south suburbs and is a dedicated White Sox fan. The White Sox Rate Field ball park has a papal portrait on a wall and seat markers in the now famous section of where the future pope sat during game one of the 2005 World Series. The Sox were champions that year.

The 44th president said he "had the pleasure of getting to know Pope Francis pretty well, and he was legit."

"You know, there's some figures — (Pope Francis) was one, the Dalai Lama is another, who they're how you hope they are," he said. "They kind of walk the walk. And my sense of this new pope is, he's ... cut from that cloth, somebody who worked in places that really needed help."

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Obama said Leo's ministry "wasn't just preaching from the pulpit but getting his hands dirty, trying to help people. So I'm looking forward to talking to him."

Cohen indicated Obama would likely be able to swing a meeting with the pope.

"I think you can," he said.

"At some point it'll probably happen," said Obama, nodding.

In the almost 50-minute interview, the former president talked publicly for the first time about a meme posted on Trump's social media account of Obama and the former first lady depicted as apes — a racist trope historically used to disparage African Americans.

"I think it's important to know that the majority of the American people find this behavior deeply troubling," Obama said.

"There's this sort of clown show that's happening in social media and on television," he said. "And what is true is that there doesn't seem to be any shame about this, among people who used to feel like you had to have some sort of decorum, and a sense of propriety and respect for the office, right? So that's been lost."

He continued: "But the reason I point out that I don't think the majority of the American people approve of this is because ultimately, the answer is going to come from the American people."

The AI-generated portrayal, set to the music of "The Lion King," of prominent Democrats as animals including the Obamas as apes, was posted late night Feb. 5 and removed by noon Feb. 6. It drew widespread criticism from both Democratic and

Republican lawmakers and faith leaders, among them well-known Black Catholics and other Catholic leaders.

Trump, for his part, has refused to apologize for the incident or hold any person in the White House accountable for posting the meme.

The Josephites, a Catholic religious order of priests dedicated to serving African American communities, issued a statement on its social media condemning the "deafening silence" and demanded an "immediate and unequivocal public apology."

"This is yet another example of the persistent and sinful dehumanization of Black people in public life," the statement said.

It added, "Racism is not merely a social failing; it is a sin that wounds the Body of Christ and corrodes the moral fabric of our society."