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Secretary of State Marco Rubio, speaks during a Memorandum of Understanding signing ceremony with EU Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security Maros Sefcovic, at the State Department, Friday, April 24, 2026, in Washington. (AP/Rod Lamkey, Jr.)

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Washington — May 4, 2026

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Secretary of State Marco Rubio will travel to Rome and Vatican City this week in a bid to ease rising tensions between President Donald Trump and Pope Leo XIV over U.S. policies, particularly the Iran war.

The State Department said Monday that Rubio, a Catholic who with this trip will have visited Italy or the Vatican at least three times as the Republican president's top diplomat, would be in Italy on Thursday and Friday. The Vatican announced that Rubio would meet with Leo, the first American pontiff, on Thursday.

"Secretary Rubio will meet with Holy See leadership to discuss the situation in the Middle East and mutual interests in the Western Hemisphere," the department said. "Meetings with Italian counterparts will be focused on shared security interests and strategic alignment."

The trip comes as Trump has criticized Leo for his stances on the Middle East and elsewhere and as the president has drawn pushback for posting a social media image likening himself to Jesus Christ.

Trump lashed out at Leo on social media last month, saying the pope was soft on crime and terrorism for comments about the administration's immigration policies and deportations as well as the Iran war. Leo then said God doesn't listen to the prayers of those who wage war. Then, Trump posted the Christ-like image of himself.

Trump has refused to apologize to Leo and has sought to explain away the now-deleted social media post by saying he thought the image was of him as a doctor.

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The tension has spilled over into Italian politics, with Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, a long-time Trump ally, taking exception to Trump's comments about the pope. Trump in return also criticized her as his ire against NATO allies expands over what he sees as a lack of support for the Iran war — most recently with the Pentagon planning to pull thousands of troops out of Germany in the coming months.

Rubio has often been called on to tone down or explain Trump's harsh rhetoric as it relates to Europe, NATO and the Middle East, but the dispute with the pope has domestic political implications in the U.S. with midterm congressional elections approaching.

Leo, the first U.S.-born pope, has said he was not making a direct attack against Trump or anyone else with his general appeal for peace and criticisms of the Iran war and other conflicts around the world.

Rubio has already traveled to Italy twice in his official capacity as secretary of state since last year. The first trip in May 2025 included Leo's inaugural mass and a private meeting with the pontiff and Vice President JD Vance. The second, in February, was also with Vance when they both attended the opening of the Milan Winter Olympics and met with American athletes.