News



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks to the media in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington April 18, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Nathan Howard)



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President Donald Trump again repeated the false claim that Pope Leo XIV supports Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon, laying bare tensions between Washington and Rome days before Secretary of State Marco Rubio will meet with the pope.

"He thinks it's fine for Iran to have a nuclear weapon," Trump said about the pope in an interview with Salem News Channel on May 4. "I think he's endangering a lot of Catholics and a lot of people."

Trump was asked about his recent spat with the pope and about whether he would raise the subject of Jimmy Lai, a Catholic pro-democracy activist who was sentenced to a 20-year prison sentence in China earlier this year, during his upcoming meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

"The pope would rather talk about the fact that it's okay for Iran to have a nuclear weapon, and I don't think that's very good," Trump said. Leo has previously declined to comment on Lai's imprisonment when asked about the subject.

Trump repeated a false statement he has made on numerous occasions alleging that the pope believes Iran should be permitted to have a nuclear weapon.

Leo has repeatedly called for an end to the war in Iran and has condemned the use, development and possession of nuclear weapons in all forms.

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The president's comments came days before Rubio will meet with the pope on May 7 during a trip to Italy. Brian Burch, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, said the United States' top diplomat will meet with Leo "to have a frank conversation about U.S. policy, to engage in dialogue," according to Reuters.

Rubio and Vice President JD Vance, both Catholics, met with Leo following his election to the papacy last year. Vance recently drew attention for questioning the pope's understanding of Catholic teaching on the morality of war.

Rubio is widely seen as a stabilizing force within the Trump administration and has often been tasked with easing tensions after diplomatic flare-ups, including with European officials and in the aftermath of the United States' capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

His meeting with Leo comes at another delicate moment as relations between the Trump administration and the first U.S.-born pope have grown increasingly strained.

Trump launched a biting attack against the pope on Truth Social on April 12, calling the pontiff "weak on crime" and "terrible for foreign policy." Several GOP officials stood behind the president's rhetoric critical of the pope.

Speaking to reporters the next day, Leo said he had "no fear of the Trump administration" and would not "shy away from announcing the message of the Gospel."

The pope later made clear that he is "not trying to debate the president."

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