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Pope Leo XIV and U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio smile during a private audience at the V

Pope Leo XIV and U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio smile during a private audience at the Vatican May 7, 2026. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Simone Risoluti)



by Justin McLellan

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"There's a lot to talk about with the Vatican," Secretary of State Marco Rubio said before his meeting Thursday with Pope Leo XIV, set against the backdrop of President Donald Trump's repeated attacks on the head of the Catholic Church and new polling showing waning support for the president among Catholics.

Evidently, they had plenty to discuss in their more than 45-minute meeting. Rubio's May 7 meeting with the pope on the first of the secretary's two-day visit to Rome apparently ran long: At the start of his next appointment, Leo apologized to staff from the Vatican's publishing house for keeping them waiting.

The Vatican described the discussions as "cordial" in a statement released hours after the meeting, adding that "the shared commitment to fostering good bilateral relations between the Holy See and the United States of America was reaffirmed" in the secretary’s conversation with the pope and subsequent meetings with Vatican officials.

"There was then an exchange of views on the regional and international situation, with particular attention to countries marked by war, political tensions, and difficult humanitarian situations, as well as on the need to work tirelessly in favor of peace," the Vatican said.

Despite the vindictive language Trump has directed at the pope both online and in person in recent weeks, Rubio's meeting with Leo appeared amicable.

The pope looked pleased as he greeted Rubio in the library of the Vatican's Apostolic Palace, and the two smiled broadly as they exchanged gifts, according to an edited video of the meeting released by the Vatican. The pope gave Rubio a pen made of wood from an olive tree, "olive of course being the plant of peace," he said.

Leo, who had gained a reputation for being a soft-spoken pope, has emerged as a vocal critic of the United States and Israel's war with Iran, repeatedly calling on leaders to pursue a ceasefire and urging ordinary citizens to contact their elected representatives to plead for peace.

> 'The pope is doing what he must do, the pope is being the pope, so to attack him in this way, to reprimand what he does seems to me a bit strange.'
> —Cardinal Pietro Parolin
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The resulting tension between the first U.S.-born pope and the Trump administration boiled over last month, when the president issued a digital diatribe against Leo in a post on Truth Social, calling him "weak on crime" and "terrible for foreign policy." Other Republican officials followed suit in attempting to blunt the pope's appeals for peace.

A social media post from the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See said the two discussed "the situation in the Middle East and topics of mutual interest in the Western Hemisphere" and that the meeting "underscored the strong relationship between the United States and the Holy See and their shared commitment to promoting peace and human dignity."

Also in the meeting was U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Brian Burch, the co-founder of the conservative political advocacy group CatholicVote tapped by Trump to be his representative to the Vatican.

After sitting down with the pope, Rubio met with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, and Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Vatican foreign minister. In total, the secretary spent some two and a half hours in the Apostolic Palace. A video of the meeting showed Rubio, an American of Cuban descent, speaking Spanish with Parolin, who was a longtime Vatican ambassador in Venezuela.

Before his trip, Rubio denied that the purpose of his meeting with the pope was to "smooth things over" with the Vatican. Instead, he said, he intended to discuss concerns about religious freedom around the world and the humanitarian situation in Cuba, where the church has been active in distributing humanitarian aid supplied by the United States.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, greets U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, greets U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio as he arrives for a private audience with Pope Leo XIV at the Vatican May 7, 2026. (OSV News photo/Vatican Media/Matteo Pernaselci)

But the Vatican's top diplomat said discussion of Trump's recent tirades against Leo would be unavoidable.

"I imagine that everything that has happened in these days will be talked about," Parolin told reporters May 6. "We can't not touch on these topics."

"The pope is doing what he must do, the pope is being the pope, so to attack him in this way, to reprimand what he does seems to me a bit strange," the cardinal said.

Three days before the Leo-Rubio meeting, Trump said the pope was "endangering a lot of Catholics and a lot of people" with his position on Iran, repeating the false

claim that Leo supports allowing Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon.

Without naming the president, Leo responded to the attack in comments to reporters upon leaving the papal retreat outside Rome the following evening.

"If someone wants to criticize me for announcing the Gospel, do so with the truth," he said. "The church for years has spoken against all nuclear weapons, there is no doubt about that, so I simply hope to be heard for the value of the Word of God."

Trump has repeatedly said that the pope believes Iran "can have a nuclear weapon," despite Leo's frequent condemnation of the use, possession and development of nuclear weapons in all forms.

Rubio, who has been deployed on other occasions by the Trump administration to cool tensions sparked by the president's incendiary rhetoric, walked back the allegations from a direct attack on the pope.

"What the president basically said is that Iran can't have a nuclear weapon because they would use it against places that have a lot of Catholics and Christians and others for that matter," he said. The president "doesn't understand why anybody, leave aside the pope ... would think that it's a good idea for Iran to have a nuclear weapon," he said.

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The meeting came as Trump's support among Catholics, who comprised a key component of the coalition which elected him president, appears to wane.

A Washington Post-ABC News-Ipsos poll released May 6 showed that Trump's support among U.S. Catholics fell to 38%, a 10-point drop since February 2025, and his approval among White Catholics fell from 63% to 49%.

The new poll also found overwhelming disapproval of Trump's post depicting himself in the likeness of Jesus, with 87% of Americans and 90% of Catholics viewing it negatively. It also found that 69% of Americans and 68% of Catholics negatively viewed Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's public prayer asking God to deliver "overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy."

Rubio, a Catholic, previously met Leo alongside Vice President JD Vance, another Catholic, following the pope's inauguration Mass last May. Trump, however, has had no publicly known direct communication with the pope.

Ahead of the May 7 meeting, Parolin said it was "premature" to say whether Trump and Leo might speak directly.

"The Holy Father is open to all options; he has never shied away from anyone," he said. "So if there were an offer or a request for direct dialogue with President Trump, I imagine he would have no trouble accepting it."

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This story has been updated to include information from a Vatican statement.