

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 24, 2014 at 3:11pm

Pope Francis meets scandal-scarred French President Francois Hollande

by Eric J. Lyman by Religion News Service

Vatican City — French President Francois Hollande, embroiled in a controversy surrounding an alleged affair with an actress, met Friday with Pope Francis, who was unusually somber in his public appearance with the scandal-scarred French leader.

There was no official comment about what the two men discussed in their private 35-minute meeting, but the pontiff -- known for his friendly and informal style -- appeared more stern and serious than usual as he sat across an ornate desk from Hollande.

Hollande has earned headlines across France and beyond for his alleged affair with actress Julie Gayet. The allegations sparked so much fury that French first lady Valerie Trierweiler had to be admitted to the hospital.

The jury is still out on whether the audience with the popular pontiff would help repair Hollande's tarnished image at home.

Even without the alleged affair, Hollande's first visit with Francis was expected to be awkward: The 59-year-old president is an acknowledged nonbeliever and campaigned to legalize same-sex marriage. He has kept religious issues at an arm's length since taking office in 2012.

A brief Vatican statement said the two men discussed "the contribution of religion to the common good" and several other topics, including "the promotion of the dignity of the human person" and "the family, bioethics, respect for religious communities and the protection of places of worship," as well as issues around the globe.

Hollande tried to make the best of the situation during his meeting, giving Francis a copy of a biography of Francis of Assisi, the 13th-century saint who was the inspiration for Francis' papal name.

In the most lighthearted moment of the meeting, the pope quipped: "He's your patron saint as well," Francis said in reference to Hollande's first name.

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