



Written by [Rebecca Terrell](#) on May 25, 2017

Pope Plays Nice During Trump's Vatican Visit

Major media touts a vast chasm between ideologies of the leader of the free world and the leader of the Catholic world. But in President Donald Trump's first meeting with Pope Francis at the Vatican on Wednesday, both leaders tempered their differences with rhetoric worthy of subtle UN diplomats. The pontiff wanted to talk about climate change; the president wanted to discuss combatting terrorism. In the end, they settled on ambiguous "fundamental values" to "promote human rights, combat human suffering, and protect religious freedom," as relayed in a White House [press release](#) immediately following the half-hour private audience. Trump did appear to score a few Francis points with his pledge of \$300 million of U.S. taxpayer dollars for "anti-famine" foreign aid in countries such as Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and Nigeria.



Overall, the pope seemed reserved. He returned Trump's effusive greeting and friendly "It's an honor to meet you" with uncharacteristic detachment and a rather awkward welcome, prompting one reporter to [comment](#) that this somber Francis did not "exude his usual warmth and cheerfulness," and another to [remark](#) that the pontiff looked "for all the world like he'd rather be literally anywhere else but in that room with that man." Though the Holy See press office [described](#) discussions between Trump and the Holy Father as "cordial," Pope Francis certainly reserved his toothiest grins for First Lady Melania Trump, who wore a black lace mantilla and long-sleeved black dress, the traditional garb for women in private audience with the pontiff.

Perhaps Francis' conduct was influenced by the memory of his comments questioning Trump's Christianity during the presidential campaign, when he said (from inside the Vatican walls) that anyone who wants to build walls rather than bridges is "not Christian," referencing Trump's proposal to combat illegal immigration with a wall along the Mexican border. Then-candidate Trump, a Presbyterian, countered Francis' attack as "disgraceful." After the election, Francis compared Trump's victory to the rise of Nazism in Germany. The two men also disagree on proper ways to address the environment, poverty, and international relations.

However, a gentler manner accompanied the pope's face-to-face comments Wednesday as he addressed his pet issues of climate change and world peace, though Secretary of State Rex Tillerson later told reporters that "immigration itself did not come up." He said that instead, Francis presented Trump with a copy of his influential and controversial [encyclical on the environment](#), which argues that humans are destroying the earth, and calls radical environmentalism a moral imperative. Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin also urged Trump to maintain U.S. commitment to the [Paris climate agreement](#), despite



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his campaign promise to pull out of that UN treaty. Tillerson said the president intends to make a final decision upon his return home after this nine day, multi-nation tour.

Francis also gave Trump copies of his encyclicals [Evangelii Gaudium](#) and *Amoris Laetitia*. The former denounces market-based capitalism, and the latter has caused consternation among Catholic Church officials and laity due to what critics call dangerous ambiguities on hot-button topics of divorce and homosexuality.

The president's gifts to Pope Francis were more tailored to the pontiff's tastes: five custom-bound books written by [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), whom the pope [praised](#) on his visit to the United States in 2015. Trump also gave a piece of granite from the MLK memorial in Washington, D.C., and a bronze sculpture that the White House said represents "hope for a peaceful tomorrow." When Francis presented Trump with a large medallion of an olive branch and said, "I give this to you so that you can be an instrument of peace," Trump replied, "We can use peace."

Neither the White House nor the Vatican has issued statements detailing the private conversation between Francis and Trump, but both press offices [expressed](#) satisfaction "for the good existing bilateral relations between the Holy See and the United States of America." When the president left, he told the pope, "Thank you. I won't forget what you said." Afterwards, Trump wrote on Twitter: "Honor of a lifetime to meet His Holiness Pope Francis. I leave the Vatican more determined than ever to pursue PEACE in our world."

Does this mean that Trump has had a conversion to the socialistic aims Pope Francis seems to embrace? Probably not. Michele Dunne of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington told [Catholic News Service](#) that "while they are likely to differ again in the future, today's meeting poured balm on a wounded relationship."

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