

Biden Meets With Pope Francis at Vatican

ROME/WHITE HOUSE — U.S. President Joe Biden spoke Friday about his 75-minute private meeting with Pope Francis, saying the two men prayed together for peace and discussed global issues like climate change, as Biden prepares for a whirlwind diplomatic tour that includes a gathering of the world's wealthiest nations and a major climate summit.

Biden said the two men did not discuss an issue currently dividing the U.S. Catholic church: the divide between Biden's personal opposition to abortion and his stance as president, where he has fought against efforts by states to limit abortion access. Some conservative American bishops are seeking to deny Biden access to communion over this stance.

When asked about the matter, Biden said: "we just talked about the fact that he was happy I was a good Catholic."

Biden, a practicing Catholic who regularly attends Mass, said he did not receive communion from the head of the church. Communion is not usually part of papal audiences with heads of state, church experts have said. This is Biden's fourth meeting with this pope, but his first as president.

When asked if they discussed the rift in the U.S. church, Biden replied: "That's a private conversation."

The president and first lady Jill Biden were welcomed Friday by the head of Papal Household, Monsignor Leonardo Sapienza. Around noon, the first couple had a private audience with the pope before participating in a broader delegate meeting, which on the U.S. side included Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and White House Deputy Chief of Staff Jen O'Malley Dillon.

Administration officials described this meeting as both personal and political.

Francis once guided the Biden family through personal grief and perches permanently behind the president's shoulder in a framed photo that overlooks the Oval Office.

During a visit to the United States in 2015, Biden has said, the pope took time to talk with the future president and his family not long after the death of his eldest son, Beau.

National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday the meeting, while primarily personal, would also cover important policy issues. The White House said the two, accompanied by first lady Jill Biden, would "discuss working together on efforts grounded in respect for fundamental human dignity, including ending the COVID-19 pandemic, tackling the climate crisis and caring for the poor."

"First, there'll be the obvious personal dimension," Sullivan said earlier in the week. "...On policy issues, of course, in the international realm, they'll be talking about climate and migration and income inequality and other issues that are very top of mind for both of them."

The abortion question

But on the issue of abortion, the two men are clearly divided. The Catholic Church unambiguously opposes abortion. Biden, who says he doesn't personally agree with the procedure, has as president resisted efforts by states and courts to limit access to abortion.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Biden's views are clear on this matter.

"You are familiar with where the president stands," she said. "He's somebody who stands up for and believes that a woman's right to choose is important."

This issue is a wedge between Biden and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which plans to meet in coming weeks to debate whether politicians who support abortion should be barred from taking Holy Communion.

Massimo Faggioli, a Villanova University theology professor and author of *Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States*, said the meeting could also affect the conflict between Biden and those conservative American clerics. Circumstances are different now, he said, than the last time a Catholic served as president.

"John Kennedy was not an embattled Catholic at war with his bishops, as is the case for Joe Biden," he told VOA. "And there are high stakes in this meeting and in the (climate) summit in Glasgow a few days later, because both the pope and Joe Biden have very high, on their list of priorities, climate change."

Separating church and state

And, Faggioli said, it's not just the president who wants to draw a line between the church and politics.

"The Vatican and Pope Francis are actively trying to protect Joe Biden's access to the sacraments — not protecting Joe Biden's policies, especially on abortion, but they're protecting Joe Biden's access to the sacrament because they are afraid that if the sacraments are used to make a political statement, the U.S. Catholic Church will lose its catholicity, which means essentially, not being a sectarian church," he said.

"It will be the elephant in the room, probably," he said. "But they agree on this idea that Catholicism is a big tent that should not be defined by political affiliations, and even less, partisan loyalties."

The White House stressed that this meeting was primarily personal.

"I think the president's faith is, as you all know, is quite personal to him," Psaki said earlier in the week. "His faith has been a source of strength through various tragedies that he has lived through in his life."

And, as the White House has also stressed, the president is willing to meet with other spiritual titans. Earlier this week, Biden hosted Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of 200 million Eastern Orthodox Christians.

"Our president here is a man of faith and man of vision, and we know that he will offer to this wonderful country and to the world the best leadership and direction within his considerable power," Bartholomew said, after a 45-minute meeting with Biden in the Oval Office.

More importantly, the patriarch noted, the two men used their massive platforms to push for something that other major faith leaders are also embracing: widespread vaccination.

Some information for this report came from The Associated Press, Reuters and Agence-France Presse.