

**SEE PENTAGON
THREATENED THE
POPE(BELOW) WHY
WOULD YOU MEET WITH
SOME WHO THREATEN
YOU?**

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/04/10/trump-vatican-pentagon-meeting/>

**Cardinal's meeting at
Pentagon was 'unusual,'
Vatican official says**

U.S. and Vatican officials have sought to downplay accounts of a strained relationship, but there have been tensions between the Trump administration and the Catholic Church.

Updated

April 10, 2026 at 1:08 p.m. EDT12 minutes ago

10 min

Summary84

[Make us preferred on Google](#)

Cardinal Christophe Pierre leads a Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington in April 2025. (Astrid Riecken/For The Washington Post)

By [Natalie Allison](#)

,

[Anthony Faiola](#)

and

[Michelle Boorstein](#)

Through the first year of President Donald Trump's second term, tensions between his administration and the Vatican — now with the first U.S.-born pope — had simmered. Days after the one-year mark of Trump returning to office, an unusual meeting between the two sides took place that has now turned up the temperature of the public discussion about the relationship. Following expressions of concern by Pope Leo XIV and Vatican officials over the administration's actions in Venezuela, Minneapolis and elsewhere,

Pentagon officials on Jan. 22 hosted a top Vatican diplomat, Cardinal Christophe Pierre, then the Holy See's ambassador to the United States, for a rare visit. It is not typical for a church official to meet with the Defense Department instead of the State Department or White House.

During the discussion, the small group of Pentagon and Vatican officials discussed their differing views of current events, according to people on both sides with knowledge of the conversation.

What is less clear is how adversarial the meeting was.

One senior Vatican official familiar with internal assessments of the meeting called it "unusual" and not "a walk in the park." It was "a frank and direct dialogue on issues where the distance between the Vatican and the United States is evident and clear," said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive internal assessments.

In the weeks before the Pentagon meeting, Leo had publicly said multiple times that nations should use diplomacy and not war. On Jan. 9, he gave a much-discussed address to his diplomatic corps, warning that "war is back in vogue" and that unnamed powers had "completely undermined" the post-World War II order. He criticized governments that use "weapons as a condition for asserting one's own dominion." Such a mentality, Leo said, "gravely threatens the rule of law."

In light of the pope's comments, the Defense Department officials "attempted to justify [their] military activity" and sought to frame American force as "a legitimate path to peace," said one person who spoke with people who attended the Pentagon meeting. That pitch, the person said, surfaced "contrasting views as to the role and purposes of war" from both sides. The person spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

The Vatican and government statements portray the encounter as far more mild than some news coverage and social media chatter since news of the meeting was first reported this week by [the Free Press](#). That story framed the meeting as Pierre having been "summoned" by Elbridge Colby, a Catholic serving as Defense Department undersecretary for war policy.

Since then, the narrative of a hostile dressing-down of church officials by U.S. military leaders has dominated some corners of liberal social media platforms. The criticism has prompted harsh pushback from conservative Catholics.

Critics of the Trump administration latched on to a claim in the story that a U.S. official in the meeting "went so far as to invoke the Avignon Papacy," the era in the 1300s when the French crown used military power to dominate the papal authority. Tweets condemning U.S. officials have been shared by the thousands, with Trump detractors pointing to the report of the meeting as evidence of a red line crossed by the administration.

On Wednesday, when Vice President JD Vance, a Catholic who is close with Colby, was asked by The Washington Post for his opinion, he said he had not seen the reporting about the meeting.

"I'd like to actually talk to Cardinal Christophe Pierre, and frankly, to our people, to figure out what actually happened," said Vance, who acknowledged he had "met" Pierre previously. The Apostolic Nunciature to the United States, or Vatican Embassy, is across the street from the vice president's home at the Naval Observatory in Northwest Washington.

Soon after Vance weighed in, Pentagon officials dismissed the story as “highly exaggerated and distorted,” saying in a statement that the two sides had “a respectful and reasonable discussion.”

The Apostolic Nunciature did not offer any disagreement in its assessment, saying it was “grateful” for opportunities to meet with U.S. officials “to discuss areas of mutual concern.”

The effort by U.S. officials to quell the controversy suggested the extent to which an administration that has often seemed to disregard outside views appears concerned about perceptions that it is at odds with a new and popular U.S.-born pope.

Brian Burch, the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, released a statement Thursday after speaking with Pierre. He said the Cardinal called aspects of the story “fabrications,” including the “threat of Avignon.” Burch said Pierre described the meeting as “frank and cordial.” The Apostolic Nunciature had no additional response to Burch’s statement. Pierre did not respond to a request for comment.

On Friday morning, as international attention to the issue spread, the Vatican issued a statement:

“As confirmed by His Eminence Christophe Pierre, former Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, his meeting with Mr. Elbridge Andrew Colby was part of the Papal Representative’s regular mission and provided the opportunity for an exchange of views on matters of mutual interest. The narrative offered by some media outlets about this meeting is completely untrue.”

In the flurry of statements, the Defense Department released photos on Thursday of the meeting. The pictures showed Pierre and Colby smiling together and shaking hands, and sitting around a small table with associates. Seated next to Colby was David A. Baker, the Defense Department’s deputy assistant secretary for European and NATO policy.

Related Articles

Next



As pope seeks dialogue and diplomacy, 2 US cardinals reject US-Israeli war ...
March 9, 2026



A president and a pope: The world's most influential Americans are at odds ...
April 10, 2026



Pope says Trump's threat to destroy Iranian civilization is 'truly unaccept...
April 7, 2026



With Mideast in conflict, Pope Leo criticizes those who invoke God for war
April 3, 2026



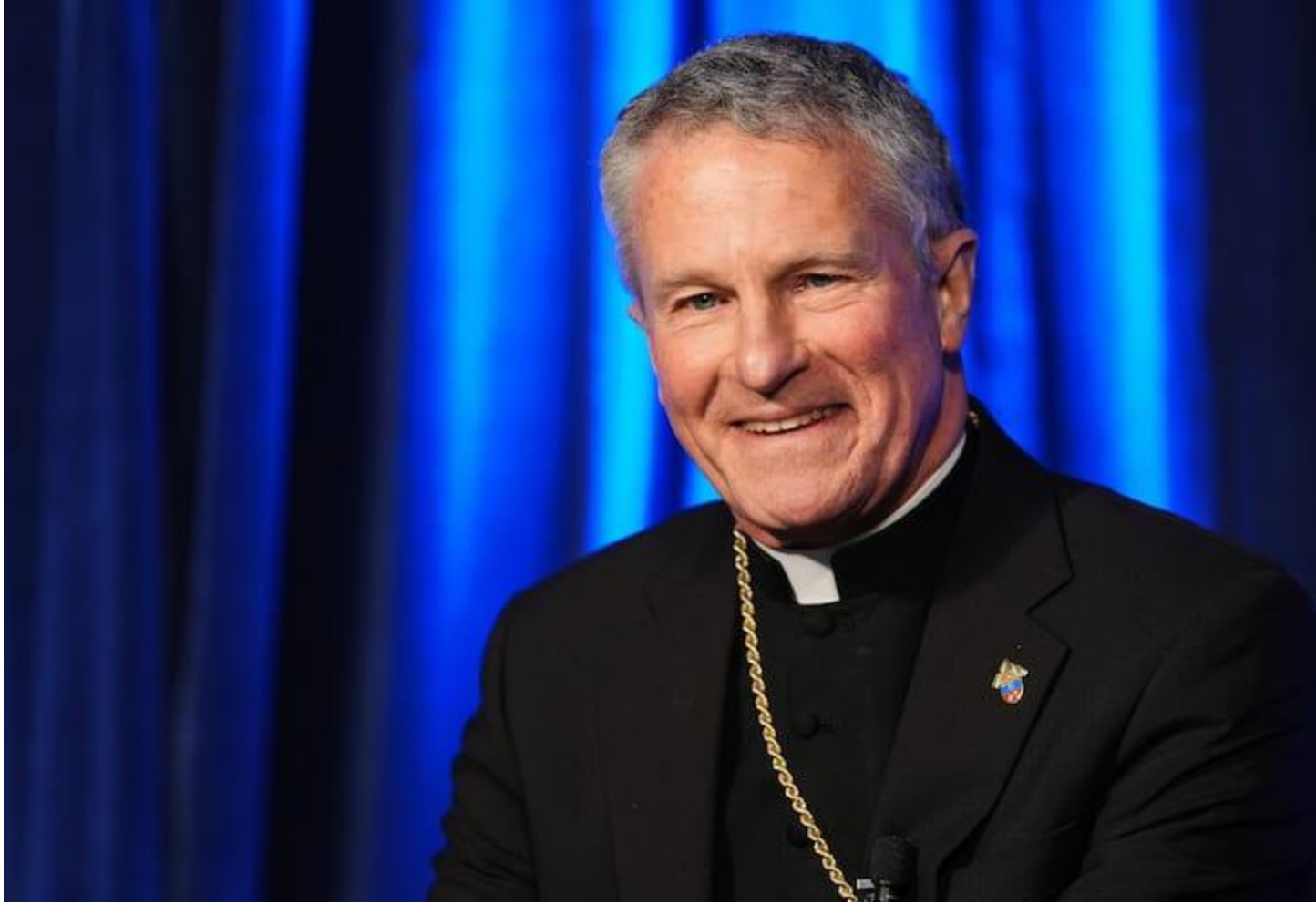
Pope names veteran Vatican diplomat as ambassador to the US to manage relat...
March 7, 2026



Top Catholic cardinals say U.S. foreign policy raises moral questions
January 19, 2026



US Catholic cardinals urge Trump administration to embrace a moral compass ...
January 19, 2026



'Morally acceptable' for U.S. troops to disobey orders, archbishop says
January 20, 2026



Catholic leaders recoil from Trump's pope post
May 4, 2025



Pope Francis often criticized Trump. But he knew how to charm him, too.
April 25, 2025

A church official with knowledge of the meeting, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss the private discussion, told *The Washington Post* the candid conversation did not involve U.S. officials threatening the Vatican and also disputed the claim that the Avignon papacy was invoked to hint at military action against the church. The official suggested that the meeting was merely the Vatican doing what it is called to do — using available channels of diplomacy and dialogue to express its views.

Holy See officials and observers, however, called the Pentagon meeting with Pierre highly unusual, and disclosure of the previously unreported meeting raised eyebrows in Vatican City.

“I don’t recall similar [encounters],” said the Rev. Antonio Spadaro, undersecretary of the Vatican’s Dicastery for Culture and Education. “What I can say is that the classic rules of diplomacy have been somewhat disrupted at this time. We’re witnessing meetings that would have once been conducted with very specific procedures and have instead become highly theatrical — I’m thinking of the one between Trump and Zelensky, at the White House. In this historical context, with these dynamics, it’s hard to say what’s usual, normal, fair, and what isn’t.”

There is no indication that Leo — or Pierre, for that matter, held their tongues following the Pentagon meeting. In fact, just the opposite.

In late February, the French-born Pierre attended a Mass in Minnesota, after which he joined senior U.S. cardinals in denouncing the administration's immigration crackdown in the state.

"I'm very proud, personally, to see our church, you know, be on the side of those who suffer," Pierre said, according to the Associated Press, adding that Leo backed the U.S. bishops' support of migrants.

During that event, Massimo Faggioli, a religion scholar who attended it, said one topic was how U.S. bishops were becoming more aware of the "real nature of Trumpism" and that they could not continue to side with the Republican Party simply because of the party's opposition to abortion.

He said he worried that there was undue pressure being placed on the Vatican during the meeting with Pierre at the Pentagon.

"I don't know what was said in the meeting, but the place where it happened — the Pentagon — is already a message in itself," Faggioli said.

Leo at times has been blunt when criticizing administration policy, as when he described treatment of migrants in the United States last year as "inhuman." More often, however, he has been circumspect, tending to refrain from mentioning Trump or the administration by name.

In January, just days after the U.S. intervention to capture Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, Leo spoke to diplomats in Vatican City about "the weakness of multilateralism." Without mentioning the administration, he argued that a "diplomacy that promotes dialogue and seeks consensus among all parties is being replaced by a diplomacy based on force."

He has grown more pointed over the course of the war in Iran, challenging the administration's depictions of a warlike God who picks sides. On Palm Sunday, he said God "does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war," and quoted Isaiah 1:15, saying, "Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen — your hands are full of blood."

On Easter Sunday, he declared, "Let those who have weapons lay them down!" After Trump threatened to destroy "a whole civilization" in Iran, Leo bluntly called the remarks "truly unacceptable."

The Vatican said in February that Leo would not visit the United States this year, a decision that came after officials in the Holy See had considered a trip that would include a possible address by Leo to the U.N. General Assembly in September.

That trip never came together, according to a Vatican official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak freely, because of the midterm elections and standing Vatican policy to avoid papal trips during major national campaigns.

That official disputed another claim in the Free Press story that the pope may never visit his homeland while Trump is in power.

Separately, Spadaro said: "The Pope is against war, not against Trump or any other political figure or head of state. There is a very clear message — the defense of peace, of international law — that has always characterized the Holy See."

In a statement, White House spokeswoman Anna Kelly noted Trump's increase in Catholic support in the 2024 election and said the administration has a "positive

relationship with the Vatican, which was strengthened when Vice President Vance attended the Pope Leo XIV's inaugural mass last year.”

In a February [interview with The Washington Post](#), Vance acknowledged that he as a government official has “a different job” than the clergy.

“So that is going to inevitably lead to conflict between the government and the clergy,” Vance continued. “What I try to do is come at that conflict in a spirit of charity.”

Faiola reported from Rome. Stefano Pitrelli in Rome and Aaron Schaffer in Washington contributed to this report.

What readers are saying

The comments express strong disapproval of Donald Trump and his administration, particularly regarding their interactions with the Catholic Church and the Vatican. Many commenters criticize Trump's perceived support among Catholics, questioning the alignment of his actions with... [Show more](#)

This summary is AI-generated. AI can make mistakes and this summary is not a replacem

<https://newrepublic.com/post/208820/pentagon-threatened-pope-criticized-donald-trump>

[Ellie Quinlan Houghtaling/](#)

April 8, 2026/5:25 p.m. ET

Share This Story

Pentagon Threatened the Pope After He Criticized Trump

**It was so bad that Pope Leo changed his plans
to travel to the U.S.**



Relations between the United States and the Catholic Church have not been the same since January, when senior U.S. defense officials shared an abrasive message with a Vatican official.

Days after Pope Leo XIV delivered his State of the World speech, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby summoned Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the Vatican's U.S. representative, to a closed-door Pentagon meeting for a bitter lecture.

"The United States," Colby said, according to a blistering new report by *The Free Press*, "has the military power to do whatever it wants in the world. The Catholic Church had better take its side."

One U.S. official present at the meeting brought up the Avignon papacy, a period in the fourteenth century in which the French monarchy bent the Catholic Church into submission, ordering an attack on Pope Boniface VIII that led to his downfall and subsequent death and forcing the papacy to relocate from Rome to Avignon, a region inside France.

The Trump administration had taken issue with the pope's critique of its militaristic proclivities. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and other top Pentagon officials were particularly aggrieved by portions of Leo's January 9 speech in which the pope argued that "a diplomacy that promotes dialogue and seeks consensus among all parties is being replaced by a diplomacy based on force," and that "war is back in vogue, and a zeal for war is spreading."

The pope's address was dissected line by line and interpreted as a hostile message toward the administration, reported Letters from Leo Substack writer Christopher Hale.

It was difficult not to interpret Leo's comments as an immediate commentary on Donald Trump's second administration, which had at that point bombed Iran's nuclear facilities, kidnapped Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, fiercely advocated for the dissolution of NATO, and threatened America's allies, including claiming that the U.S. would seize control of Canada and Greenland.

But the blatant intimidation tactic is the first of its kind ever made by American officials to the Catholic Church. There are no public records of

any previous meetings between Vatican and U.S. officials at the Pentagon, let alone an instance in which the world power suggested that it could force the Bishop of Rome into captivity.

The Vatican was so alarmed by the Pentagon's warning that Pope Leo canceled his plans to visit the U.S. later in the year, reported Hale, who noted that "many in the Vatican saw the Pentagon's reference to an Avignon papacy as a threat to use military force against the Holy See."

Tensions had not been mended by February, when the Holy See rejected the White House's invitation to host Pope Leo—the religious order's first U.S.-born pontiff—for America's 250th anniversary in July. Instead, the Catholic leader has arranged to visit a very different locale on July 4: Lampedusa, a tiny island between Tunisia and Sicily where North African immigrants wash ashore by the thousands.

"Robert Francis Prevost is too deliberate a man to have chosen that date by accident," commented Hale.

The White House has dismissed the entire account, writing in a statement to reporter Barbara Starr that "the Free Press's

characterization of the meeting is highly exaggerated and distorted.”

“The meeting between Pentagon and Vatican officials was a respectful and reasonable discussion,” the Defense Department official continued. “We have nothing but the highest regard and welcome continued dialogue with the Holy See.”

This story has been updated.

Share This Story

Read