

Francis welcomes Cuba's prisoner release following talks with Vatican as part of dialogue

Nicole Winfield : 14-17 minutes : 1/19/2025

ROME — **Pope Francis** on Sunday hailed the release of Cuban prisoners as a “gesture of great hope” that he prayed would be undertaken elsewhere, as he welcomed an agreement the **Vatican** helped facilitate as part of a three-way dialogue with Washington and Havana that dates back to the Cuban missile crisis.

Cuba said this week that it was releasing 553 prisoners “in the spirit of” **Francis’** 2025 Holy Year and had informed the pope of its decision ahead of time. The move came a day after the Biden administration announced its intention to lift the U.S. designation of the island nation as a state sponsor of terrorism.

The Jubilee is a once-every-quarter-century event that primarily is aimed at encouraging the faithful to make pilgrimages to **Rome**. But **Francis** and popes before him have also used Holy Years as an occasion to ask governments to make gestures of clemency for prisoners, to whom **Francis** has long dedicated much of his priestly ministry.

Francis, history’s first Latin American pope, referred to the Cuban release during his weekly Sunday blessing.

“It is a gesture of great hope that concretises one of the intentions of this Jubilee year,” he said. “I hope that in the months to come, initiatives of this kind will continue to be undertaken in the different parts of the world, infusing confidence in the journey of individuals and peoples.”

In the hours after the release deal was announced, Cardinal Sean O’Malley, a senior papal aide who has longstanding ties to Latin America, revealed that he himself had been a behind-the-scenes player in it.

“Over the past several years, I have carried messages from **Pope Francis** to the presidents of the United States and **Cuba** seeking the release of prisoners in **Cuba** and improved relationships between the two countries for the good of the Cuban people,” O’Malley, the retired archbishop of Boston, wrote on his blog this week.

“Pope Francis’ patient and persistent efforts to assist the Cuban people and to foster greater understanding between our two peoples have been an underlying force in bringing about this historic agreement,” he added.

O’Malley’s revelation recalled the job that he and the now-disgraced ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick had undertaken during the **Vatican**-facilitated U.S.-**Cuba** detente of 2014 that resulted in the resumption of diplomatic relations.

That deal marked the first and in some ways greatest diplomatic achievement of the **Francis** pontificate. **Francis** eventually defrocked McCarrick in 2019 following a **Vatican** investigation that determined he sexually abused adults and minors.

The **Vatican’s** three-way dialogue with **Cuba** and the United States goes back further and reached its most critical moment at the peak of the Cuban missile crisis when, in the fall of 1962, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev ordered a secret deployment of nuclear missiles in **Cuba** that were soon detected by U.S. spy planes. As the Kennedy administration considered its response, with the threat of nuclear war looming, Pope John XXIII begged for peace in a public radio address, in a speech to **Vatican** ambassadors and also wrote privately to Kennedy and Khrushchev, appealing to their love of their people to stand down.

Many historians have credited John XXIII’s appeals with helping both sides step back from the brink of nuclear war.

“In the crisis John XXIII uses his enormous diplomatic talents,” church historian Alberto Melloni told The Associated Press. “He knows he cannot press the Catholic Kennedy, and that he cannot give the Christian morality speech. So he sends an identical and contextual telegram to JFK and NK asking them to listen to the cry of families asking for peace.”

Citing the pope’s diaries and documents from both the U.S. and former Soviet Union, Melloni said Khrushchev

took the letter to the Politburo, claiming recognition from the Holy See and that the U.S.-Catholic Church alignment on anti-communism had been broken, and ordered the withdrawal of the missiles.

The following year, John XIII's landmark peace encyclical "Pacem in Terris" (Peace on Earth) was published, and President Lyndon B. Johnson awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom "with distinction." It's an honor that the Catholic President Joe Biden bestowed on [Francis](#) this past week in the only such award "with distinction" of his presidency.

[Francis](#) has long made ministering to prisoners a top priority, and visited [Rome's](#) main prison at the start of the Holy Year to open its holy door to underscore the need to give prisoners in particular signs of hope.

[Cuba](#) has long tied prisoner releases to appeals from the [Vatican](#), with thousands of prisoners released ahead of each of the papal visits to the island by St. John Paul II in 1998, Pope Benedict XVI in 2012 and [Francis](#) in 2015, [Vatican News](#) recalled.

[Vatican](#) officials have hailed the Cuban release a concrete example of gestures it hopes to see during the Jubilee, alongside a decision by Zimbabwe to abolish the death penalty and Biden's decision to commute the sentences of 37 of the 40 prisoners on the U.S. federal death row - a decision [Francis](#) had urged before the fact and praised afterward.

"Let us hope that this 2025 continues in this direction and that the good news multiplies, above all with a truce for so many conflicts under way," Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin said this week.

Associated Press religion coverage receives support through the AP's collaboration with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

Copyright © 2025 The Washington Times, LLC.