

Putin and Pope Swap Gifts, Talk Syria During Visit

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Vladimir Putin and Pope Francis exchanging gifts at the Vatican on Wednesday.

President Vladimir Putin presented Pope Francis with an icon of Our Lady of Vladimir during a brief visit to the Vatican on Monday afternoon, which some observers hope could improve ties between the Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches.

Putin and the pope spoke privately for 35 minutes in the hall of the Vatican library, used for top level meetings, after which they publicly exchanged presents, with Putin giving Francis the icon, and the pope handing the president a piece of glazed pottery depicting the Vatican Gardens, Interfax reported.

Pope Francis asked Putin to send his regards to Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, but no official message from the Patriarch was communicated to the pope.

Behind closed doors, Putin and Francis were to discuss the settlement of the Syrian crisis

and "protection of the Christian heritage" in North Africa and the Middle East, Putin's aide Ushakov told Itar-Tass early Monday.

Additionally, Putin and the pope were to talk about cooperation of their states within the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe.

During his first two terms as president, Putin met with the two previous popes, John Paul II in 2000 and 2003 and Benedict XVI in 2007.

Putin's meeting with the pope was part of the president's two-day visit to Italy and the Vatican, his first official trip to the Apennine peninsula during his third term.

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