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Putin Wishes Pope Leo Success, Hopes for 'Constructive' Ties

By AFP

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Newly elected Pope Leone XIV appears at the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. **Andrew Medichini / AP Photo / TASS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin wished newly-elected Pope Leo XIV "success" on Thursday, saying he hoped the American pontiff would engage in "constructive dialogue" with the Kremlin.

"I am confident that the constructive dialogue and cooperation established between Russia and the Vatican will continue to develop on the basis of the Christian values that unite us," Putin said in a message published by the Kremlin.

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Robert Francis Prevost became the first pope from the United States on Thursday, picking the

papal name Leo XIV after cardinals from around the world elected him leader of the world's 1.4 billion Catholics.

The new pope now faces a momentous task: as well as asserting his moral voice on a conflict-torn global stage, he must try to unite a divided Church and tackle burning issues such as the continued fallout from the sexual abuse scandal.

The Kremlin leader had met with Pope Leo's predecessor, Pope Francis, in person three times — and last spoke with him by phone in December 2021, just weeks before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In 2016, Francis met Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill in Cuba, marking the first-ever meeting between the heads of the two churches. The historic encounter concluded with a joint 10-page declaration, hailed at the time as a milestone in relations between the Catholic and Russian Orthodox branches of Christianity.

Pope Francis had repeatedly called for peace in Ukraine, although he stirred controversy last year after urging Kyiv to "raise the white flag and negotiate." Ukrainian officials reacted to those remarks with fury, even while the Vatican insisted the words "white flag" were intended to mean a cessation of hostilities, not a surrender.

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