

Meetings of popes and presidents: Some fun facts before the visit of President Obama with Pope Francis

President Obama is scheduled to meet with Pope Francis at the Vatican March 27 and there has been lots of speculation about what their conversation will entail. I did a bit of research and came up with some interesting facts about meetings of popes with our U.S. presidents.



President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle Obama met with Pope Benedict XVI on July 10, 2009 at the Vatican. Tomorrow he will meet with Pope Francis for the first time.(CNS photo/Catholic Press Photo)

1. Of our 44 United States presidents, only 12 have ever met with the then-current Holy Father.
2. Tomorrow's Vatican visit of President Obama marks the 28th meeting of a president with the pope.
3. These papal-presidential meetings, which include 6 different popes and 12 U.S. presidents, have occurred over a span of 95 years.
4. The first was held on January 4, 1919 at the Vatican with the meeting of Pope Benedict XV with President Woodrow Wilson and focused on peace after the end of World War I.
5. The second meeting, which marked the start of every standing president meeting with every current pope, was held almost 40 years later on December 6, 1959 between President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Pope John XXIII at the Vatican. Records note that the lack of a common language was a barrier to direct communication, which was done through interpreters.
6. This first and only meeting of a Catholic president with a Holy Father was held on July 3, 1963 at the Vatican between President John F. Kennedy and Pope Paul VI who had a discussion about civil rights.
7. There have only been two meetings of a pope and a current First Lady without her husband:

The first took place the year after President Kennedy took office on March 11, 1962 when Jacqueline Kennedy joined Pope John XXIII in a private audience when she was traveling to Pakistan and India.

Almost 44 years later, First Lady Laura Bush met with Pope Benedict XVI on

February 9, 2006 for about 20 minutes before heading to Turin for the Olympics. Accompanied by her daughter Barbara and Francis Rooney, the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, Mrs. Bush shared that the Holy Father wished the U.S. delegation “a peaceful time” at the Olympics.

8. The first visit of a pope to the United States took place in 1965 when Pope Paul VI addressed the United Nations. He met with President Lyndon Johnson during that visit in New York on October 4, 1965.

9. The two would also meet at the Vatican two years later on December 23, 1967, which would mark the first time a pope and president met more than once during office.

10. Pope Paul VI met with four U.S. presidents during his 15-year pontificate: John F. Kennedy (1963), Lyndon Johnson (1965, 1967), Richard Nixon (1969, 1970), and Gerald Ford (1975).

11. Pope John Paul II met with five U.S. presidents at 15 different times during his almost 28-year pontificate: Jimmy Carter (1979, 1980), Ronald Reagan (1982, 1984, and twice in 1987), George H.W. Bush (1989, 1991), Bill Clinton (1993, 1994, 1995, and 1999), and George W. Bush (2001, 2002, and 2004).

12. The first of only two visits of a pope to the White House took place on October 6, 1979 when President Jimmy Carter hosted Pope John Paul II. The second (and last, to date) White House visit took place 29 years later on April 16, 2008 when President George W. Bush hosted Pope Benedict XVI on his 81st birthday.

13. A far-flung meeting: President Ronald Reagan met with Pope John Paul II on May 2, 1984 in Fairbanks, Alaska while the Holy Father’s plane was refueling on his journey to Seoul. President Reagan was traveling back from China at the same time. Shortly thereafter, formal diplomatic relations were opened between the Vatican and the United States.

14. President Clinton met with the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, three times here in the United States: in Denver (1993), Newark, New Jersey (1995), and St. Louis (1999), more than any other U.S. president.



Former President Bill Clinton standing with Pope John Paul II during a welcoming ceremony in Denver Aug. 12, 1993. (CNS photo)

15. The only time a U.S. president met with a pope at the papal summer retreat in Castel Gandolfo occurred on July 23, 2001 when Pope John Paul II hosted President George W. Bush.

16. Pope John Paul II received the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the the Vatican from President George W. Bush on June 4, 2004.

17. When Pope John Paul II died in 2005, three U.S. presidents attended his funeral Mass at St. Peter’s Square: President George W. Bush, and former Presidents

George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

18. President George W. Bush is the first president to have met with two popes during his presidency (Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI). He met with them three times each for a total of six visits with a pope, the most papal meetings ever with a current president.



Former President George W. Bush with Pope John Paul II during a meeting June 4, 2004 at the Vatican. (CNS photo/Reuters)

19. President Obama met with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican on July 10, 2009 and gave him a stole that had covered the earthly remains of the first U.S. bishop to be canonized, Saint John Neumann.

20. The March 27 visit of President Obama to the Vatican marks the first visit of Pope Francis with the U.S. president.