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U.S. President Donald Trump speaks to the media as he departs the White House for Las Vegas

U.S. President Donald Trump speaks to the media as he departs the White House for Las Vegas in Washington April 16, 2026. (OSV News/ Reuters/Jessica Koscielniak)

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President Donald Trump told reporters at the White House April 16 that he does not see a meeting with Pope Leo XIV as "necessary" after the president lashed out at the pontiff on social media and in verbal remarks over the pontiff's opposition to the Iran war over the course of several days starting April 12.

In response to a question about why he is "fighting" with the pope, Trump disputed that characterization, arguing, "I have a right to disagree with the pope."

"The pope made a statement. He says 'Iran can have a nuclear weapon,' I say 'Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon,'" Trump said, speaking over a reporter pointing out Pope Leo, the first U.S.-born pope, has not made any such statement in public remarks.

The pontiff has consistently called for the rejection of nuclear weapons, and there is no evidence he supports Iran having such weapons.

Leo has been a staunch critic of warfare generally, including the combat operations initiated by the U.S. and Israel in a surprise attack against Iran on Feb. 28. He also condemned Trump's threat to wipe out Iran's "whole civilization" as "truly unacceptable."

Trump repeatedly claimed that Iran has killed "42,000 people over the last few months." However, Human Rights Activists in Iran, a U.S.-based nonprofit non-governmental organization, reported in late January that 42,324 protesters had been arrested. It confirmed 6,221 people have been killed and is investigating another 17,000 potential deaths.

The massacres of civilian protestors took place in January as Trump encouraged them to take over government institutions and promised them, "Help is on the way." But the combat operation came several weeks into the Iranian government's crackdown on the protestors after it had mostly suppressed them.

In defense of their combat operations, the Trump administration has argued the Iranian regime presented grave nuclear threats.

"Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon," Trump said, arguing that prospect would be dangerous for every country "including Italy, where he's stationed."

Asked about a statement defending the church's teaching about just war theory issued by Auxiliary Bishop James Massa of Brooklyn, New York, chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, Trump replied, "I'm all about the Gospel, but I also know that you cannot let a certain country, which is a very mean-spirited country, have a nuclear weapon."

"If they did, they would use it, and I think they used it quickly, and they would kill many millions of people," Trump said.

In June 2025, citing Iran's nuclear ambitions, the Trump administration carried out strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. The White House said at the time that the strikes "obliterated" those sites and "suggestions otherwise are fake news." But shortly before the 2026 operations, White House officials claimed Iran was close to having enough material to build a nuclear weapon.

However, U.S. intelligence assessments said that while Iran has a stockpile of enriched uranium, they were several key steps away from developing such a weapon.

Asked if he would meet with Pope Leo, Trump replied, "I don't think it's necessary."

Leo told journalists aboard the papal plane to Algiers, Algeria, on April 13, that he is not a politician, but he will "continue to speak out loudly against war, looking to promote peace, promoting dialogue and multilateral relationships among the States to look for just solutions to problems."

"I have no fear neither of the Trump administration nor speaking out loudly of the message of the Gospel," he said, "which is what I believe I am here to do, what the Church is here to do."

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