

Pope Francis and Vladimir Putin hold 'constructive' talks

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Vatican called Monday's (Nov. 25) much-heralded summit between Pope Francis and Russian President Vladimir Putin "constructive" and "cordial," though there was little immediate indication it would lead to further dialogue.

The 35-minute closed-door meeting got underway about 40 minutes behind schedule, due to Putin's late arrival and focused on Syria, as expected, an area where Francis and Putin are unexpected allies.

A brief Vatican communique on the meeting said the two men discussed the need for a diplomatic solution to the bloody conflict there, while also expressing concern for Christians in the war-torn country.

Putin also conveyed greetings from Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, a small sign of the continued thaw in the traditionally icy relations between Moscow and the Vatican that, by some accounts, started on this date in 1960 — when then-Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev called Pope John XXIII to wish him well on his 79th birthday.

Francis and Putin also exchanged gifts: Putin received a mosaic, while the pontiff was given an icon of the revered Virgin of Vladimir, which both men admired before bending down to kiss it.

But despite what Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, termed a "constructive" and "cordial" meeting, there were no announced follow-up dialogues planned, and "no discussion whatsoever" of a papal visit to Russia.

Putin's two-day visit got underway with an impressive show of force: Italian media reported the Russian leader landed in Rome with five private jets, 50 armed vehicles, and an entourage that included 11 government ministers.