



Ressort: Politik

Interview to H.E. Koji Abe Ambassador of Japan to Holy See

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On the occasion of the presentation of his letters of credence, on December 20th 2025, Pope Leo XIV received in audience His Excellency Koji Abe, the new Japanese Ambassador to the Holy See. A veteran diplomat, the Japanese representative—born May 5, 1964, married with four children—holds a degree in Law from Kyoto University and a distinguished career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which began in 1987.

Over the years, he has held strategic positions: from the Second Africa Division to the Middle East and Africa Bureau, through positions as First Secretary in Belgium, Counselor in the Cabinet Office for Legislation, Director of the Country Assistance Planning Division II for International Cooperation, Counselor at the Embassy in Canada, Director of the Division for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Master of Ceremonies of the Imperial Household, Vice Consul General in New York, Minister at the Embassy in France, and Ambassador to Madagascar and the Comoros. This exclusive interview offers the opportunity to learn more about the vision and experience of His Excellency Abe, now a leading figure in the dialogue between Japan

and the Holy See.

Carlo Marino: Your Excellency, thank you for your time. The informal relationship between the Holy See and Japan was established in 1919 when the Japanese government accepted a request from the Holy See to send an apostolic delegate. Full diplomatic relations began in 1942 making Japan the first Asian nation to do so. In 1958 the Japanese mission to the Vatican in Rome was upgraded to an embassy. What are the diplomatic relations between the two states like at the time of Pope Leo XIV?

His Excellency Koji Abe: The world is currently undergoing its most significant structural transformation since the end of World War II, due to shifts in the balance of power and intensifying conflicts and confrontations. While the free and open international order based on the rule of law is facing serious challenges throughout the world, including the Indo-Pacific, the presence of the Global South is growing, and it is playing a larger role in the international community.

In this context, Japan and the Vatican have had a relationship for nearly 500 years since the landing of the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier in Japan in 1549. Furthermore, the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1942 during World War II,

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and will celebrate their 85th anniversary next year. It is a well-known fact that Hiroshima and especially Nagasaki, which has deep ties to Catholicism and a large Catholic population, suffered immense damage from the two atomic bombs at the end of the war. Ever since World War II, Japan has committed itself to aspire for peace in the world. In this way, Japan and the Vatican have cooperated to work together hand in hand for peace and the furtherance of humankind.

The international community as a whole faces numerous challenges that must be addressed, and cooperation is more crucial than ever. Some countries in the international community have continued to expand their military power in opaque ways for many years and have continuously

intensified their attempts to unilaterally change the status quo through force or coercion. Japan opposes such actions and distinguishes itself from such attempt. In this international community at a turning point in history, we must secure peace, security, and prosperity of our own country and people, maintain and strengthen the international order based on values and principles such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and proactively create a peaceful and stable international environment. To this end, Japan has been and intends to continue, working in cooperation with the Vatican and other countries, to lead the world from division and conflict to reconciliation and cooperation.

Furthermore, Japan has pursued a meticulous diplomatic approach, respecting the diversity of each nation, engaging in discussions on common challenges from the same perspective with all countries, and providing support that truly meets their needs. In addition, under the multilateral trading system, Japan has championed free trade, promoting a rules-based, free, and fair economic order, while simultaneously providing cooperation to developing countries based on the concept of human security, and working to solve global challenges, including achieving the SDGs, through capacity-building support. Japan has also actively contributed to nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and international peacebuilding efforts.

Carlo Marino: Pope Francis has strongly declared that both the use and the mere possession of nuclear weapons are "immoral" and a "crime" against human dignity. The third Meeting of States Parties of UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was held at United Nations Headquarters in New York from 3 to 7 March 2025. The Meeting conducted a thematic debate on the risks to humanity of a nuclear conflict and its devastating humanitarian consequences, and adopted a Declaration entitled "Strengthening our commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons amid the rising global instability". What is the position of Japan, as a global leader in peace advocacy, about this Treaty?

His Excellency Koji Abe: Japan maintains the position that, at present, it will neither sign nor ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

Japan believes that "extended deterrence," including U.S. nuclear deterrence, is essential in the current

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"difficult security environment" posed by neighboring nuclear powers.

Japan believes that the TPNW, in which no nuclear-weapon states are members, is insufficient as a framework for realistically advancing nuclear disarmament. Therefore, Japan prioritizes the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as the "cornerstone" of nuclear disarmament and its contribution as a "bridge" to promote dialogue between nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states.

While the Japanese government shares the ultimate goal of nuclear abolition with the Vatican, it continues to take a "realistic approach" that distances itself from the TPNW regarding specific methods.

Carlo Marino: Shifting to culture and faith: The Holy See has shown great interest in Japanese spirituality, particularly Shinto's reverence for nature. Pope Francis has made ecology a central pillar of his papacy. In what ways has Japan's traditional ecological wisdom influenced its diplomatic dialogue with the Vatican on issues like climate change and the protection of biodiversity?

His Excellency Koji Abe: The perspective expressed by former Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* on environmental issues—that "the Earth is our shared home"—was reflected in the theme of his 2019 visit to Japan, "To Protect All Life." Japan's spirituality of "seeing divinity in nature" offers important clues to correcting "anthropocentrism" and leads to a "humble attitude towards nature." Japan and the Vatican can become partners in appealing to the world for a "transformation of lifestyles" in addressing climate change.

Carlo Marino: Your country faces the demographic challenge of a rapidly aging and shrinking population, a concern the Vatican also shares regarding the decline of faith communities in Europe.

Carlo Marino: Your country faces the demographic challenge of a rapidly aging and shrinking population, a concern the Vatican also shares regarding the decline of faith communities in Europe. Has the Embassy of Japan explored any joint initiatives—perhaps in bioethics, care for the elderly, or supporting young families—where Japanese social policy and Catholic social teaching could learn from one another?

His Excellency Koji Abe: The issues of "declining birthrate and aging population" and "the dignity of life" are moral challenges common to all humanity.

Pope Leo XIV, in a speech to the diplomatic corps in January of this year, called the elderly "treasures of society" and emphasized the importance of "palliative care based

on true solidarity." Japan's advanced care techniques and knowledge of community-based inclusive societies should be shared extensively, and the mental care of "alleviating loneliness," which is highly valued by Catholicism, and Japan's care system can complement each other.

The Holy See emphasizes "human dignity" in AI, and Japan is following with great interest the bioethical

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dialogue on how science and technology should relate to human life.

Your Excellency, the Holy See is renowned for its “quiet diplomacy”. Japan is often perceived as a reserved yet pragmatic nation. Could you provide a recent example of collaboration between Japan and the Vatican that successfully de-escalated a regional tension or facilitated humanitarian aid,

perhaps in Southeast Asia or concerning the plight of religious minorities?

His Excellency Koji Abe : The "quiet diplomacy" between Japan and the Vatican plays a crucial role in peace and humanitarian aid in Southeast Asia. In October 2025, East Timor officially joined ASEAN. The majority of the country's population is Catholic, and the Vatican has provided spiritual guidance. Japan has provided continuous support in the areas of infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and agriculture and rural development since the turbulent period before and after East Timor's independence, supporting practical capacity building for the country's ASEAN membership. Japan also supports measures against human trafficking in Southeast Asia

through international organizations such as the IOM (International Organization for Migration), and the Vatican, in turn, strives to protect victims through its Church network.

In this way, Japan and the Vatican continue to provide valuable support in Southeast Asia to protect the most vulnerable people without escalating conflict, through "quiet diplomacy" accompanied by "humanitarian considerations."

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