

'Noah' Star Russell Crowe Meets With Pope Francis Seeking Movie Endorsement

Russell Crowe, who plays the title character in the new Hollywood blockbuster *Noah*, lobbied hard for a personal audience with Pope Francis. What he got Wednesday instead was a blessing.

Crowe used social media in recent weeks to try to cajole Francis to watch *Noah*, which has drawn fire from religious groups that say the film takes too many liberties with the biblical story of Noah's Ark and the great flood. Crowe also asked for a private audience with the pontiff.

The Vatican's chief spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, quashed both ideas; he said Francis would not watch the film and Crowe would not be granted a private audience.

But Crowe, along with director Darren Aronofsky and some studio officials, were in the invitation-only section of St. Peter's Square on Wednesday, where they reportedly met the pope briefly and received a blessing.

"Pope Francis' comments on stewardship and our responsibility in the natural world are inspirational," Aronofsky, who was nominated for an Oscar four years ago for *Black Swan*, said via social media. "When the opportunity to hear him speak [arose] ... I couldn't miss the chance to listen and learn."

Crowe, who is known for his quick temper, was equally measured, calling his participation in the audience "a privilege."

Some backers of the film tried to cast Wednesday's encounter as a kind of tacit endorsement for the movie, but Vatican

officials made it clear that was not the case.

Still, the brief meeting is likely to draw new attention to the film, which will go into wide release March 28. It hits Italian cinemas April 10.