

Orbiting astronauts chat with Italy's president

May 23 2011, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



This image provided by NASA shows the intersecting thin line of Earth's atmosphere with the International Space Station's solar array wings photographed Thursday May 20, 2011 by an STS-134 crew member while space shuttle Endeavour remains docked with the station. (AP Photo/NASA)

(AP) -- The astronauts circling Earth got another VIP call from Rome on Monday.

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano phoned the shuttle-station complex, two days after [Pope Benedict XVI](#) called.

Napolitano spoke with the two Italian astronauts, Paolo Nespoli and Roberto Vittori. The spacemen held up an Italian flag that will return to Earth with Nespoli in just hours, and flapped it between them.

"It's a little hard to make the flag fly in the absence of gravity," Nespoli explained.

Vittori received the flag from the president to mark the 150th anniversary of Italy's unification, and flew it up on Endeavour, which is making NASA's next-to-last space [shuttle](#) flight.

"We're the country of poets, travelers and discoverers, and we must continue to do these things, and these are the things that make us grow." Nespoli said in Italian.

The president asked Nespoli - who's ending a five-month stay at the [International Space Station](#) - whether he could see the gondolas and Grand Canal of Venice. "Or is that a little too much to ask?" he wondered.

Nespoli said by using a zoom lens, he could see ferries, but no gondolas. He spoke of the breathtaking views of Earth seen from the space station's Italian-made cupola, or glassed-in lookout: the Egyptian pyramids, Great Wall of China, Venice, [Mount Vesuvius](#).

"But also from another side it looks fragile," Nespoli said, describing the thin layer of atmosphere.

Nespoli, along with an American and a Russian, will head back to Earth on Monday afternoon aboard a [Russian Soyuz capsule](#). That will leave three space station residents. After the Soyuz undocks, it will hover nearby so Nespoli can snap unprecedented photos of a shuttle parked at the space station. A Soyuz has never headed for home while a shuttle is present.

The Soyuz will land about five hours later in Kazakhstan.

Flight director Derek Hassmann said the pictures of the linked shuttle and station will be made available as soon as possible following touchdown.

Endeavour and its six [astronauts](#), Vittori included, will remain at the space station for another week. The shuttle landing is scheduled for June 1.

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