Vatican
Vatican News

A view from St. Peter's Square of the crowd of pilgrims gathered at the Vatican during the installation Mass of Pope Leo XIV on May 18, 2025. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

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Just three days ago, Maria Lourdes Flores decided to buy a plane ticket from California to Rome to join 200,000 people attending the historic Mass of inauguration for the first pope from the United States, Leo XIV.

"I was just working Thursday and I said, 'You know what, maybe I can hop on a last minute flight,' " Flores said. "I just want to be blessed by the pope and see the pope."

Pilgrims from all across North America journeyed to be in the Eternal City. Some even came solely to be present for this special moment.

Pilgrims hold an American flag after Pope Leo XIV, formerly Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, celebrated his inauguration Mass May 18, 2025, at the Vatican. He is the first U.S. pope in history. (OSV News/Reuters/Alessandro Garofalo)

Flores was not alone to change plans at the last minute. On vacation in Naples, Italy, on Sunday morning, Joshua Sagartz decided to make the short trek to Rome in the hopes of arriving in time for the Mass. For him, it was extra special because he not only shares his home country with Leo but also his hometown.

"Everyone in Chicago is really excited to have someone from the town be pope," Sagartz explained. It was a special experience for him, even if he does not understand Italian. Sagartz highlighted how unique the opportunity was to be able to see the pope receive the papal miter and ring in person.

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Another American did not have as long of a flight to Rome for the Mass. Thomas Bubniak, originally from New Jersey, is studying abroad in Croatia. He and another student had tried to travel to Rome before but the plans fell through. But when they decided to reschedule to this weekend, their trip happened to coincide with the Mass of inauguration.

"I was really impressed and it is just so cool to be here," Bubniak shared. As a cradle Catholic, he said he never imagined there'd be a U.S. pope, but Bubniak pointed out having a pope from the United States "is good for the future of the Catholic Church" in the country.

A view of the main altar in St. Peter's Square during the installation Mass of Pope Leo XIV on May 18, 2025 (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Seven years ago, Katie Molloy moved to Rome to study. Now she lives and works in the Eternal City full-time. Originally from New York, she said being at the Mass of inauguration was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, even if she lives here.

Listening to Leo's words during the homily and the "Regina Caeli," Molloy expressed her appreciation that the pope "wants to bring peace, create bridges, and help the people suffering around the world."

No matter what state they came from or how they managed to be in Rome for the Mass, the consensus was clear: Americans are very proud to have this pope from the United States.

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