News



Thousands of people attend a Mass celebrating Pope Leo XIV at Rate Field, home of the Chicago White Sox, June 14 in Chicago. Pope Leo, a Chicago native, spoke in a prerecorded video. (RNS photo/Rachel Berkebile)

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At Rate Field, the home of the Chicago White Sox, some 30,000 people celebrated a native son, Pope Leo XIV, June 14 at a Mass organized by the Archdiocese of Chicago. Leo appeared via video from Rome, in a prerecorded message encouraging young people to engage in the community of the church.

The Mass, announced in May, was open to anyone with a ticket, which went on sale May 30 for $5 each on Ticketmaster. The first 10,000 tickets sold out in 15 minutes, and more tickets were made available and could still be purchased the day prior to the event. Bishop Lawrence Sullivan, vicar general of the archdiocese, told Chicago's WGN9 that the cost was set at $5 to "defray the cost and make sure that everybody can come."

On the way into the stadium, attendees had the opportunity to grab Pope Leo XIV souvenirs and T-shirts, many — such as a "DAAA PRAYERS" shirt — riffing on a Chicago accent as it was rendered in a long-ago "Saturday Night Live" sketch. People posed with cutouts of Leo throughout Rate Field. People also waited in line for first Mass certificates that read "My First Mass at the Ballpark."

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The event cemented not only the pride many Chicagoans have in seeing one of their own become pope, but the mutual affection felt between Sox fans and the new pontiff. The crowd whooped when a video account of his life and connections to the city showed a clip of Leo — then-Fr. Bob Prevost — in the stands at a game during the White Sox' last World Series appearance, in 2005. Leo has made no secret of his fandom, sporting a Sox hat with his white cassock earlier this week. Rate Field, meanwhile, has installed a mural of the pope near his seat for that 2005 game. Between June 14's events, people lined up to take photos in front of the mural.

In his prerecorded message, the premiere of a video that will be shown around the world to young people, Leo invited the gathering "to recognize that God is present and that perhaps in many different ways God is reaching out to you." He spoke of what being in community within the church can offer: "In the experience of living our faith together, we can find that the Lord's grace, the love of God, can truly heal us; can give us strength that we need to be the source of that hope we all need in our lives."



Pope Leo XIV-themed shirts and merchandise for sale before a Catholic Mass at Rate Field June 14 in Chicago. Cardinal Blase Cupich called his homily "the Sermon on the Mound." (RNS/Rachel Berkebile)

Chicagoland natives and Catholics Shannon Hayden, 33, and her sister Erin Hayden, 31, appreciated the message. "We have been going through a lot in the world. So it’s hard to find faith, and I think just hearing him talk about that and about hope, I think it was a really good message for young people,” said Shannon.

Both sisters were excited to see a pope from Chicago. "When you think of the pope, it's like this person that's really big and far out there," Erin said. "But it's cool to feel like, (he's) a human too.”

Fr. John Merkelis, a high school classmate of Leo's, and Sr. Dianne Bergant, a former teacher of the pope, were interviewed about their experiences with the pope. Speaking from the stage constructed in shallow center field, Merkelis described Leo as a natural leader and a down-to-earth and compassionate man. Bergant remembered Leo as a good student and said she has records of his grades to prove it. She also talked about his theology being firmly rooted in the tradition of Vatican II.

As the Mass began, incense wafted to the upper decks. Although there was little room to kneel, the creaking of tens of thousands of stadium seats was audible as people stood and sat in unison throughout the service.

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A choir and band took the crowd through hymns such as "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty," and "Alabaré." Both the program for the day's events and the Mass were trilingual, with the readings given in Spanish (the Old Testament lesson), Polish (the epistle) and English (the Gospel), representing the diversity of the Catholic Church in Chicago.

Cardinal Blase Cupich began his homily by saying, "I think I am going to remember this moment as the Sermon on the Mound." As the next day would be Trinity Sunday, the cardinal focused on theology of the triune nature of God, relating the togetherness of the Trinity, and emphasized the importance of community. He said, "Humanity is greatly diminished whenever the unborn or the undocumented, the unemployed, or the unhealthy are excluded, uninvited and unwelcome."

Cupich addressed the challenges Chicago and the nation are facing on the issue of immigration, saying that securing borders to protect the public from crime and violence is good. But, he added, "It is wrong to scapegoat those who are here without documents. For indeed, they are here due to a broken immigration system. And it is a broken immigration system which both parties have failed to fix."

His comments on immigration and the undocumented were met with cheering and applause — the loudest of the whole day's proceedings.