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An aerial view of Castel Gandolfo, the summer residence of the pope in Italy (CNS/Catholic Press Photo/Max Rossi)



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Rome — July 21, 2025

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After a 12-year hiatus, Pope Leo XIV brought back the papal tradition of vacationing at Castel Gandolfo this summer for two weeks in July and three days in August.

The town, just a short train ride south of Rome, gets its name from the castle there built during the Middle Ages by the Gandolfi family and later passed onto the Savelli family in the 1200s.

The hilltop town that sits above Lake Albano, is also home to the Vatican Observatory, The Vatican property includes a papal palace and about 135 acres of gardens and farmland, along with fruit and olive orchards. Part of the pontifical grounds has also been converted into Borgo Laudato Si' — an ecological area inspired by Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical.

So how did a family castle become part of the pontifical villas?

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  Pilgrims wait outside the papal villa for Pope Benedict XVI's Angelus prayer at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, July 18, 2010. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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A chapel is seen in the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, in 2016. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Cows are seen on the farm at the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, in an undated photo. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

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The Vatican flag flies over the main square in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Aug. 14, 2020. (CNS/Robert Duncan)

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Lake Albano is seen from a window of the papal villa in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, on Feb. 22, 2013. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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An aerial view of the gardens of the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, is seen in 2025. (CNS/Courtesy of Borgo Laudato Si)

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The Savelli family's financial issues and their refusal to repay a significant debt led to the Apostolic Chamber, or Vatican's central financial office, to take possession of the castle in 1596 under Pope Clement VIII. In May 1604, Castel Gandolfo was declared part of the Holy See patrimony and the "temporal domain of the Church," in the words of a Vatican City State account of the history of the place.

From then on, the castle was transformed into a papal residence, beginning with Pope Urban VIII in 1626, with each pontiff adapting and adding to it, making it his own.

During his 2013-2025 reign, Pope Francis did not spend his summers at Castel Gandolfo, and in 2016 the Apostolic Palace became a museum. However, in the past 100-plus years, the Vatican summer getaway has housed other popes, from Leo XIII

and Pius XII to Benedict XVI and now Leo XIV.

Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013)

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  Pope Benedict XVI sits at his desk in the papal residence at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, in 2010. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Pope Benedict XVI waves to the faithful gathered for the Angelus at the pontiff's summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Aug. 20, 2006. (CNS/Reuters/Dario Pignatelli)

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Pope Benedict XVI greets young people from the Madrid Archdiocese, from the balcony of his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Aug. 9, 2007. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano via Reuters)

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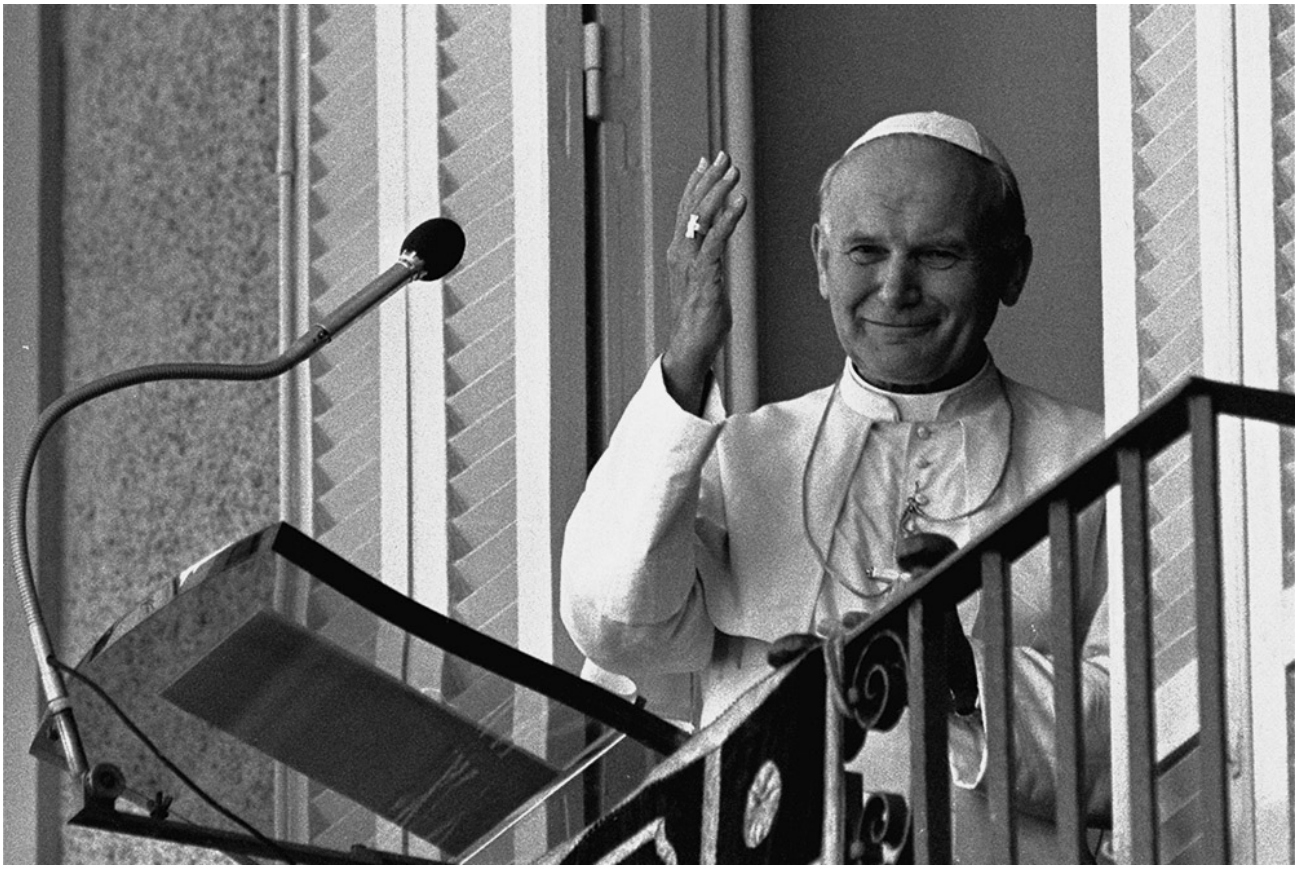
  Pope Francis prays with retired Pope Benedict XVI at the papal summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, March 23, 2013. (OSV News/Vatican Media via Reuters)

The German pontiff spent time during his eight-year pontificate at the hillside retreat, away from Rome. Notably, in 2010, he flew by helicopter to Castel Gandolfo to work on his book *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*.

Benedict XVI seemed to have a special place in his heart for Castel Gandolfo, as he spent the evening of his last day as pope on Feb. 28, 2013, in the summer residence and also the following two months, before moving to his permanent residence in retirement at the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery in Vatican City.

St. Pope John Paul II (1978-2005)

- 

A smiling Pope John Paul II waves to the faithful from the balcony of his summer residence, Castel Gandolfo, in this small town overlooking Lake Albano, south of Rome, Sept. 4, 1983. (AP/Massimo Sambucetti)

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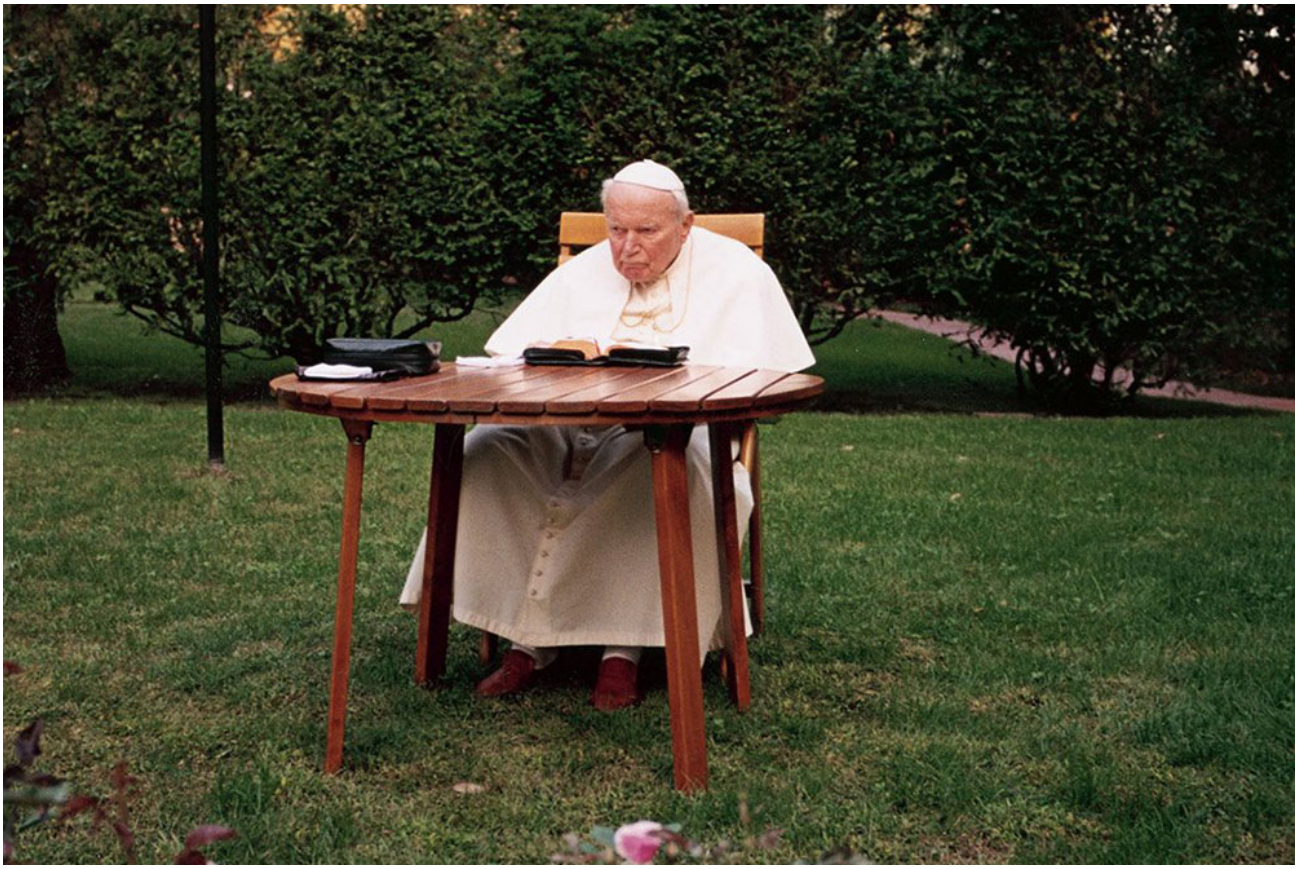
Pope John Paul II celebrates Mass on the feast of the Assumption Aug. 15, 2001, in a courtyard of the papal summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, Italy. (CNS/Reuters)

- 

Pope John Paul II prays in the garden at his summer residence of Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Sept. 19, 2004. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

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A bust of St. John Paul II decorates a room of the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, in 2016. (CNS /Paul Haring)

His relationship with the pontifical villa began before he was even elected pope. As a cardinal in Rome for the second conclave of 1978, Karol Wojtyla spent some days of rest and reflection at Castel Gandolfo. Eight days later, on Oct. 16, he became pope.

Almost immediately after taking up his new role, John Paul II traveled back to the lakeside town on Oct. 25, just nine days after being elected — which broke the centuries-old tradition of popes visiting Castel Gandolfo only during the summer months.

St. Pope Paul VI (1963-1978)

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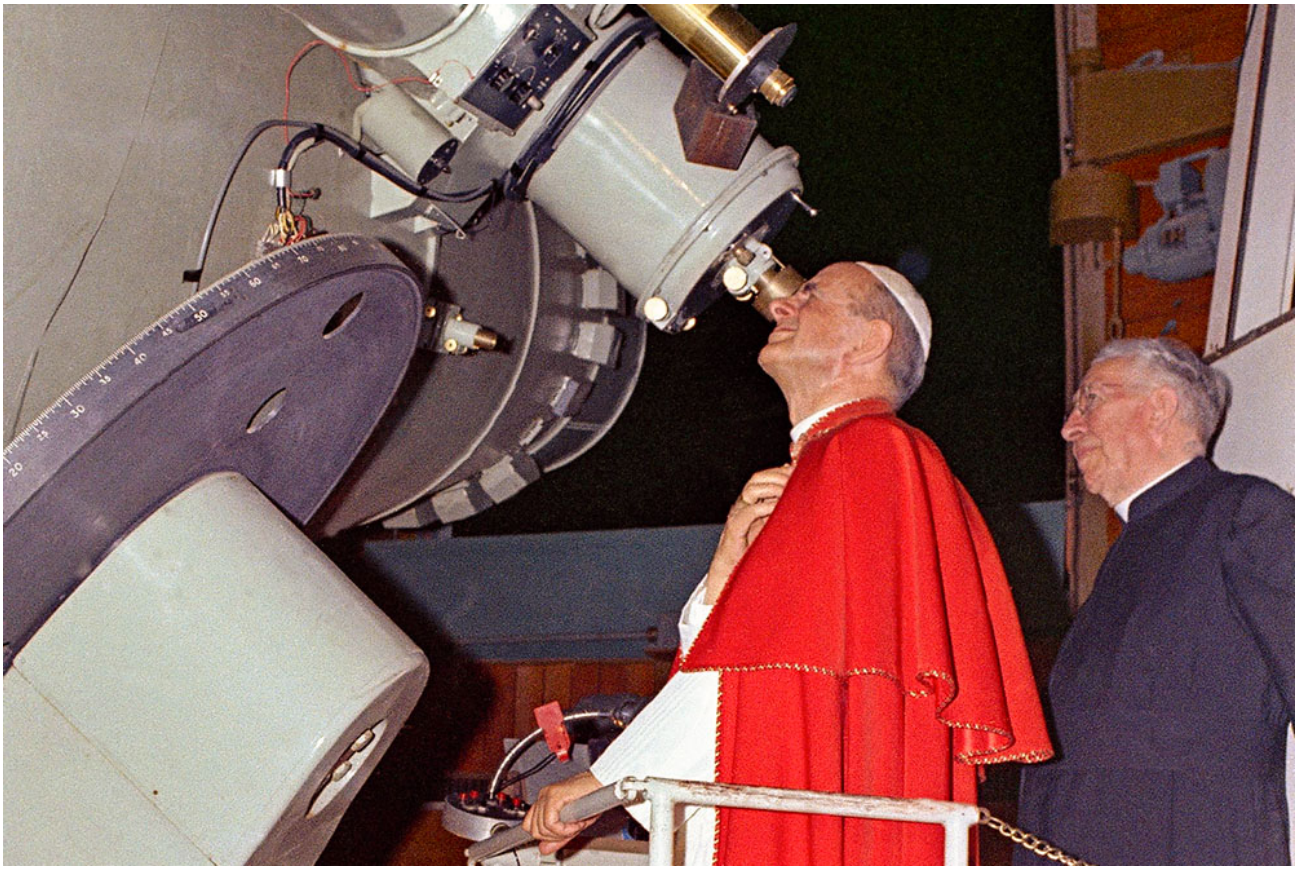
Pope Paul VI, center, is followed by a crowd as he walks the short distance from the local parish church, St. Thomas of Villanova, to the papal summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Aug. 15, 1965. (AP/Giulio Broglio)

- 

Pope Paul VI takes a peek through the telescope of the Vatican Observatory at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, to have a look at the moon, where the Apollo II astronauts were landing, on July 20, 1969. (AP)

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Vatican aides help Pope Paul VI out of a helicopter on his arrival at his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, July 17, 1975, from Vatican City. (AP/Claudio Luffoli)



Pope Paul VI greets people gathered outside the papal summer house in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Sept. 14, 1977. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano/Arturo Mari)

Every year from mid-July to mid-September, Paul VI would spend time at Castel Gandolfo. During the Holy Year of 1975, rather than moving back full time to Rome, he chose to make weekly journeys by helicopter for his general audiences.

The Italian pope also dedicated some of his time to the people of the small town. For example, he commissioned the current pontifical elementary school — now bearing his name — and the Church of Our Lady of the Lake.

Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644)

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Detail of a portrait of Pope Urban VIII by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, painted circa 1631-32 (Wikimedia Commons/Sailko)

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View of the palace and gardens of Castel Gandolfo, in a detail from a 1665 etching by Giovanni Battista Falda (Wikimedia Commons/Brown.edu)



The papal coat of arms of Pope Urban VIII is seen on a wall in Castel Gandolfo, Italy. (Wikimedia Commons/Stefano Bolognini)

Jumping back some 400 years, we find the man who first began the tradition of the popes summering in the residence at Castel Gandolfo: Urban VIII. Beginning in 1626, he returned there for 11 years, traveling to the lakeside town twice a year for two to three weeks at a time.

Urban VIII had originally chosen the location as his holiday vacation when he was a cardinal because of its views of the lake and mountains. He also considered it the healthiest area in the region.

Even from that first papal visit, the popes enjoyed the natural beauty of the town. Urban VIII would take walks and even long horse rides in the woods.

Pope Leo XIV (today)

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Pope Leo XIV greets visitors at the conclusion of the Angelus in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, July 20, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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A framed photo of Pope Leo XIV is displayed inside a local café on the main square of Castel Gandolfo, Italy, July 1, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Pope Leo XIV celebrates Mass for the Care of Creation on the grounds of the Borgo Laudato Si’ ecology center in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, July 9, 2025. (CNS/Cristian Gennari, pool)

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Visitors join Pope Leo XIV as he delivers his first Angelus from Castel Gandolfo, Italy, July 13, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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  Pope Leo XIV takes part in a tree-planting ceremony with top officers of the Italian Carabinieri at their headquarters in Castel Gandolfo July 15, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Instead of staying at the Apostolic Palace in Castel Gandolfo, Leo XIV stayed in a renovated apartment in the town's Villa Barberini, a section of gardens, during his visit this July. The visit was originally scheduled for July 6-20, but he extended it on July 20 for two more days. He plans to return to Castel Gandolfo again Aug. 15-17, the Vatican has said.

When he is not at this summer residence, Leo will be living at the papal apartment located on the top floor of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican. He is scheduled to be in Rome for the Jubilee of Youth July 28-Aug. 3.

The townspeople of Castel Gandolfo have enthusiastically welcomed the return of papal vacations. When Leo arrived July 6, people filled the main square craning to get a good view of their new summer neighbor.

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