Vatican

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Pope Leo XIV greets faithful at the end of a mass celebrated by Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle in St. Peter's Basilica on the occasion of the Youth Jubilee at the Vatican, July 29, 2025. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

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Vatican City — July 29, 2025

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Pope Leo XIV received a rock star's welcome at the Vatican's festival of Catholic influencers — priests, nuns and ordinary faithful who use their social media presence to preach and teach the faith — as he urged them to ensure that human relations don't suffer with the spread of digital ecosystems and artificial intelligence.

History's first American pope was mobbed by hundreds of influencers on July 29, their cellphones hoisted high to stream the encounter, when he arrived in St. Peter's Basilica after a special Mass. The pilgrims have descended on Rome for a special Holy Year celebration of so-called "digital missionaries," part of the Vatican's weeklong Jubilee for young people that culminates this weekend with a vigil and Mass in a vast field on Rome's outskirts.

Leo thanked the young people for using their digital platforms to spread the faith, and he gamely posed for selfies. But he warned them about neglecting human relationships in their pursuit of clicks and followers, and cautioned them to not fall prey to fake news and the "frivolity" of online encounters.

"It is not simply a matter of generating content, but of creating an encounter between hearts," Leo said in a speech that showed his ease switching from Italian to Spanish to English. "Be agents of communion, capable of breaking down the logic of division and polarization, of individualism and egocentrism."

"It is up to us — to each one of you — to ensure that this culture remains human," he said. "Our mission — your mission — is to nurture a culture of Christian humanism, and to do so together" in what he called the only networks that really matter: of friendship, love and the "network of God."

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Warnings against going off-message

For the past two days, the Vatican's message to the young influencers has been one of thanks for their social media evangelizing, but also a warning to not allow their posting to go off-message or to neglect the human dimension of all encounters.

For Leo, the issue is particularly heartfelt since he has said that addressing the threat to humanity posed by AI will be a priority of his pontificate.

Fr. David McCallum, an American Jesuit who heads a leadership development program and spoke to the influencers at a conference July 28, held periodic breaks in his presentation with instructions for those in the audience to actually speak with the person next to them, for up to 10 minutes at a time.

Cardinal Antonio Tagle, the head of the Vatican's evangelization office, urged the influencers to avoid anything that smacks of false advertising, coercion or brainwashing in their posting, or to use their platform to make money. He noted that he himself had been a victim of a fake video advertising arthritis medicine.

"Brothers and sisters, be discerning," Tagle told the influencers in his homily at the July 29 Mass.

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A mini World Youth Day in Rome

The day began with groups of influencers and young pilgrims passing through the basilica's Holy Door, a rite of passage for the estimated 32 million people participating in the Vatican's 2025 Holy Year celebrations. This week, downtown Rome swarmed with energetic, singing and dancing masses of teenage Catholic scouts, church and Catholic school groups.

It all had the vibe of a scaled-down World Youth Day, the once-every-three-year Catholic Woodstock festival that was inaugurated by St. John Paul II.

The most recent one in Lisbon, Portugal, went viral thanks to Fr. Guilherme Peixoto, a village priest in northern Portugal who also happens to be a DJ. He's in Rome this week, though it's not clear if he will reprise his now-famous set that woke young people up before Pope Francis' final Mass in Lisbon.

In it, as he jammed to house music behind his console in full clerical collar, Peixoto spliced into the set both St. John Paul II's exhortation to young people to "be not afraid" and Francis' insistence in Lisbon that the church had room for everyone, "todos, todos, todos."

That mantra has become something of the refrain for this year's youth Jubilee, with #todostodostodos being used across platforms by pilgrims posting about their time in Rome.

Pablo Licheri, who founded the Catholic Mass Times app, which provides locations and times for Catholic liturgies around the world and has registered 2 million downloads, said he has been heartened by both Leo's message of unity and the enthusiasm of social media-savvy Catholics like him.

"I was especially moved to meet so many fellow Catholic influencers in person and to pray together with others who share the same passion for spreading the joy of God's love," he said after Tuesday's Mass.

This story appears in the **2025 Holy Year** feature series. View the full series.