News

Pope Leo XIV begins the vigil with thousands of young people gathered in Tor Vergata in Rom

Pope Leo XIV begins the vigil with thousands of young people gathered in Tor Vergata in Rome Aug. 2, 2025, during the Jubilee of Youth. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Junno Arocho Esteves

View Author Profile



Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Nicole Winfield

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — August 2, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Addressing an estimated 1 million young people, Pope Leo XIV urged them to forge genuine relationships rooted in Christ rather than ephemeral online connections that can reduce individuals to a commodity. "When a tool controls someone, that person becomes a tool: a commodity on the market and, in turn, a piece of merchandise,"

the pope said during the evening prayer vigil for the Jubilee of Youth Aug. 2.

"Only genuine relationships and stable connections can build good lives." The pope arrived by helicopter at the Tor Vergata field, roughly 8 miles southeast of Rome's city center, and was greeted with cheers from young people waving flags. Many of the youth camped out overnight, sleeping in tents and sleeping bags on the dusty field, much like the World Youth Day celebration held 25 years ago in the same location.

The weekend events of the Vatican's 2025 Holy Year marks Leo's first big encounter with the next generation of Catholics.

Misting trucks and water cannons spritzed the young people to try to keep them cool, as temperatures neared 30C (85F) with hours to go before Leo arrived for the vigil. But the mood was festive, with young people dancing to a lineup of a dozen different bands as they set up camp for the night.

For the past week, these bands of young Catholics from around the world have invaded the area around St. Peter's Square for their special Jubilee celebration, in this Holy Year in which 32 million people are expected to descend on Rome to participate in a centuries-old pilgrimage to the seat of Catholicism.

The young people have been traipsing through cobblestoned streets in color-coordinated T-shirts, praying the rosary and singing hymns with guitars, bongo drums and tambourines shimmying alongside. Using their flags as tarps to shield them from the sun, they have taken over entire piazzas for Christian rock concerts and inspirational talks, and stood for hours at the Circus Maximus to confess their sins to 1,000 priests offering the sacrament in a dozen different languages.

Exiting the popemobile, Leo was handed the large Jubilee year cross, which he carried to the main altar, accompanied by dozens of young people.

After beginning the vigil with prayers, the pope engaged in a dialogue with several young people who asked him three questions. Dulce Maria, a 23-year-old woman from Mexico, spoke of the excitement of online friendships but also the loneliness that comes from connections that are "not true and lasting relationships, but rather fleeting and often illusory."

"How can we find true friendship and genuine love that will lead us to true hope? How can faith help us build our future?" she asked.

Pope Leo acknowledged the potential of the internet and social media as "an extraordinary opportunity for dialogue," but warned that these tools "are misleading when they are controlled by commercialism and interests that fragment our relationships."

Pope Leo XIV carries the Jubilee Cross.

Pope Leo XIV carries the Jubilee Cross as he walks to the altar before the start of the vigil with young people gathered in Tor Vergata in Rome Aug. 2 during the Jubilee of Youth. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

The weather largely cooperated: While Italian civil protection crews had prepared for temperatures that could have reached 34C (93F) or higher this week, the mercury hasn't surpassed 30C (85F) and isn't expected to.

Those Romans who didn't flee the onslaught have been inconvenienced by the additional hordes on the city's notoriously insufficient public transport system. Residents are sharing social media posts of outbursts by Romans angered by kids flooding subway platforms and crowding bus stops that have complicated their commutes to work.

But other Romans have welcomed the enthusiasm the youngsters have brought. Premier Giorgia Meloni offered a video welcome, marveling at the “extraordinary festival of faith, joy and hope” that the young people had created.

“I think it’s marvelous,” said Rome hairdresser Rina Verdone, who lives near the Tor Vergata field and woke up Saturday to find a gaggle of police outside her home as part of the massive, 4,000-strong operation mounted to keep the peace. “You think the faith, the religion is in difficulty, but this is proof that it’s not so.”

Verdone had already made plans to take an alternate route home Saturday afternoon, that would require an extra kilometer (half-mile) walk, because she feared the “invasion” of kids in her neighborhood would disrupt her usual bus route. But she said she was more than happy to make the sacrifice.

“You think of invasion as something negative. But this is a positive invasion,” she said.



Young people participate in the Jubilee of Youths at the Tor Vergata field in Rome Aug. 2. Officials sprayed water on the young people to keep them cool. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

Drawing from his Augustinian spirituality, Leo urged young people to emulate St. Augustine, who had a "restless youth, but he did not settle for less."

"How did he find true friendship and a love capable of giving hope? By finding the one who was already looking for him, Jesus Christ," the pope said. "How did he build his future? By following the one who had always been his friend."

Gaia, a 19-year-old woman from Italy, asked how young people can find the courage to make choices amid uncertainty.

"To choose is a fundamental human act," the pope responded. "When we make a choice, in the strict sense, we decide who we want to become."

He encouraged young people to remember they were chosen by God, and that "the courage to choose comes from love, which God shows us in Christ." The pope

recalled St. John Paul II's words spoken in the same place 25 years ago, reminding the youth that "it is Jesus in fact that you seek when you dream of happiness; he is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you."

The pope called "radical and meaningful choices," such as marriage, priesthood and religious life, "the free and liberating gift of self that makes us truly happy."

"These choices give meaning to our lives, transforming them into the image of the perfect love that created them and redeemed them from all evil, even from death," he said.

Departing from his prepared remarks, Leo expressed condolences for the deaths of two pilgrims. Pascale Rafic, an 18-year-old pilgrim from Egypt, died due to a heart condition. Earlier in the day, the pope met with a group of Egyptian youth who Rafic traveled with to Rome.

Maria Cobo Vergara, a 20-year-old pilgrim from Madrid, Spain, died July 30. While the cause of death was not mentioned in a statement published Aug. 1, the Archdiocese of Madrid said the young pilgrim suffered "four years of illness."

"Both (pilgrims) chose to come to Rome for the Jubilee of Youth, and death has taken them in these days," the pope said at the vigil. "Let us pray together for them."



Young people participate in the Jubilee of Youth at the Tor Vergata field in Rome Aug. 2. Pope Leo XIV flew in by helicopter the evening of Aug. 2 to preside over the vigil and will return for morning Mass Aug. 3. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

Will, a 20-year-old pilgrim from the United States, asked the pope how to "truly encounter the Risen Lord in our lives and be sure of his presence even in the midst of trials and uncertainties."

Recalling Pope Francis' papal bull for the Holy Year 2025, "*Spes non confundit*" ("Hope Does Not Disappoint"), Leo said that "hope dwells as the desire and expectation of good things to come," and that one's understanding of good "reflects how our conscience has been shaped by the people in our lives."

He urged them to foster their conscience by listening to Jesus' word and to "reflect on your way of living, and seek justice in order to build a more humane world."

"Serve the poor, and so bear witness to the good that we would always like to receive from our neighbors," he said. "Adore Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, the

source of eternal life. Study, work and love according to the example of Jesus, the good Teacher who always walks beside us."

He also invited young people to pray to remain friends with Jesus and be "a companion on the journey for anyone I meet."

"Through praying these words, our dialogue will continue each time we look at the crucified Lord, for our hearts will be united in him," the pope concluded.



Young people participate in the Jubilee of Youth at the Tor Vergata field in Rome Aug. 2. Pope Leo XIV has said 1 million young people could attend the event. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

Advertisement

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