Vatican
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Pope Leo XIV waves to the crowd from the popemobile as he departs after celebrating a Mass concluding the Jubilee of Youth in Rome’s Tor Vergata neighborhood Aug. 3, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Back from his summer retreat, Pope Leo XIV stepped into the brightest spotlight of his young papacy last week.

The pope was flocked by smartphones and selfie sticks during the Jubilee for Digital Missionaries and Catholic Influencers the morning of July 29. Later that evening, he kicked off the Jubilee for Youth, which drew a million young people to Rome from around the world to see him.

And standing before them at Sunday's Mass, the culmination of the weeklong youth celebration, he urged the sprawling crowd of young people to seek an encounter with the Risen Christ, "who transforms our lives and enlightens our affections, desires and thoughts."

"There is a burning question in our hearts, a need for truth that we cannot ignore, which leads us to ask ourselves: what is true happiness?" he said Aug. 3, warning that "buying, hoarding and consuming are not enough. We need to lift our eyes, to look upwards, to what is above, to realize that everything in the world has meaning only insofar as it serves to unite us to God and to our brothers and sisters in charity."

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For Leo, who has largely kept to scripted remarks since his election, the eventful week offered a proving ground. Questions loomed over Leo's capacity to connect with the crowds and break free from what has been a steady but measured start to his pontificate.

With the help of some theatrics, those questions were largely put to rest last week when the pope surprised some 120,000 young people gathered for the youth Jubilee's opening Mass July 29 in St. Peter's Square.

The young pilgrims didn't expect to get a glimpse of the pope until his general audience a day later or at Saturday's Jubilee prayer vigil. Yet in closing the opening Mass, Archbishop Rino Fisichella, pro-prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization and the chief organizer of the 2025 Jubilee, told the crowd not to leave the square.

And as the sun set over the throngs, Leo rode among the crowd for the next 20 minutes in the popemobile before taking the stage to address them with no pre-written speech in hand. Toggling between three languages, he told the pilgrims in a booming voice: "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world!" And in response to Leo, they roared.

The address offered a rare unscripted moment for Leo, who prefers sticking to written texts and rarely improvises his remarks. This time, he played to his strengths in connecting with the crowd by leaning into his multilingual ability. His speech in English, Spanish and Italian was almost certainly the most energized moment of the new pontificate.



Pilgrims from South Korea hold banners and flags promoting World Youth Day 2027 in Seoul after the closing Mass of the Jubilee of Youth in Rome’s Tor Vergata

neighborhood Aug. 3, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

And the polyglot pope once again displayed his talent for languages over the weekend, seamlessly moving between English, Spanish and Italian to respond to pilgrims and engage the international crowd in his homily.

Three young people from the United States, Mexico and Italy posed questions to Leo in their native languages about the challenges facing youth at the prayer vigil. The pope responded in kind, encouraging them to form genuine friendships, boldly pursue their vocations and develop a personal relationship with Christ.

Leo also reflected on the internet and social media, calling them tools that can become "misleading when they are controlled by commercialism and interests that fragment our relationships."

His Sunday homily, drawing heavily on previous popes and St. Augustine, was presented in three languages and distributed to reporters as "plurilingual" — a contrast to Pope Francis, whose speeches almost always remained in either Spanish or Italian, leaving listeners to search for translations after the fact.

In his greetings at the end of Mass, Leo said in English that the church "is closer than ever to young people who suffer the most serious evils, which are caused by other human beings."

"We are with the young people of Gaza, we are with the young people of Ukraine, with those of every land bloodied by war," he said. "My young brothers and sisters, you are the sign that a different world is possible, a world of fraternity and friendship, where conflicts are not resolved with weapons, but with dialogue."

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>
> — Pope Leo XIV
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Click here to see a video of NCR's Vatican correspondent, Justin McLellan, reporting from the Jubilee for Youth on the outskirts of Rome, where a million young people

gathered for a Aug. 2 prayer vigil with Pope Leo XIV.

After arriving at the field by helicopter, Leo spent more than 30 minutes driving through the sun-drenched crowds on the popemobile before the Saturday vigil. Nearing the central stage, he descended from the car and took up the pilgrims' cross, walking down the center aisle of the pavilion and up the lengthy staircase — a moment that contrasted the end of the Francis pontificate, which saw the pope largely confined to a wheelchair for nearly three years.

Following his question and answer session with the young pilgrims, Leo carried out the Eucharist for adoration. After hours of chants and songs by the crowds waiting for the pope, more than a million people fell into total silence. Only the sounds of small drones flying overhead to film the event could be heard.

Pilgrims then prepared to camp out for the pope's morning Mass.

Pierre, a 20-year-old from New Mexico, told the National Catholic Reporter that being among the million young pilgrims at Tor Vergata field gave him "a lot of courage, a lot of comfort."

"It's a big encouragement, to see everyone else here who suffers, the same as me, but who also put their trust in God, the same as me," he said.



Pope Leo XIV gives a word of thanks at the conclusion of the Jubilee of Youth in Rome’s Tor Vergata neighborhood Aug. 3, 2025. The pope presided over the closing Mass and led the recitation of the Angelus. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Melindia Rumi Cabrejas Panta, in her 20s from Chiclayo, Peru, was singing with a group of fellow Peruvians before the pope's arrival: "Give thanks to God for Leo, because the pope is Peruvian, the pope is Chiclayano, he is Pope Leo!"

She proudly showed passersby a photo of the future pope confirming her when he was bishop of Chiclayo. When Prevost was elected, "everyone in my house was in tears," she told NCR, adding that the future Pope Leo XIV was "very popular, very well-known in Chiclayo. He went to all of the towns around Chiclayo, he helped many people, he is a very good father."

After Mass, Leo said one last impromptu farewell to the throngs of young people: "Bring this joy, this enthusiasm, to all the world," he said. "Bring this greeting to all your friends, to all the young people who need a message of hope."

Pilgrims promptly replied with cheers of "Papa Leone! Papa Leone!" as the pope made his way to the popemobile to weave through the cheering crowd in the popemobile.

Nicole, a 19-year-old undergraduate student at Washington University in St. Louis, and a Chicago native, told NCR it was a special moment for her to travel to Rome to see the "pope from home."

She was among those gathered for the opening Mass of the youth Jubilee where the pope surprised the crowd.

"It was a surreal experience, I teared up a little and I thought, 'Why am I crying?' " she said with a smile.

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

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