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Pope Leo XIV gives his blessing at the conclusion of Mass for the Jubilee of Migrants and the Ju

Pope Leo XIV gives his blessing at the conclusion of Mass for the Jubilee of Migrants and the Jubilee of the Missions in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 5, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Standing before some 40,000 missionaries, migrants and those who tend to them in a drizzling St. Peter's Square, Pope Leo XIV said that refugees must not be met with "the coldness of indifference or the stigma of discrimination" upon reaching new lands in pursuit of a better life.

The pope urged Christians not to flee "to the comforts of our individualism" but to open their arms and hearts to "those who arrive from lands that are distant and violent," capping off an eventful week on migration that culminated with Leo celebrating Mass for the Jubilee of Migrants and the Jubilee of the Missions on Oct. 5.

Yet what swept global headlines this week were not the carefully prepared words of his homily, but rather an unscripted remark Leo offered to reporters days earlier as he departed the papal summer residence at Castel Gandolfo.

"Someone who says, 'I'm against abortion, but I'm in favor of the inhuman treatment of immigrants in the United States,' I don't know if that's pro-life," Leo told a small group of journalists on Sept. 30.

Pope Leo XIV applauds as he greets visitors and pilgrims from the popemobile before his wee

Pope Leo XIV applauds as he greets visitors and pilgrims from the popemobile before his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 1, 2025. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

The pope's comment was one of the sharpest articulations yet of his pro-life ethic and an unprompted provocation aimed at the American political landscape on migration. It instantly reverberated beyond the Vatican and into mainstream U.S. media.

Washington Auxiliary Bishop Evelio Menjivar-Ayala, in Rome for the Vatican's Jubilee of Migrants, said Leo's words spoke directly to the realities he sees in his ministry back home.

"What we're seeing in the United States is precisely that rejection of the dignity of migrants," he told the National Catholic Reporter in a phone interview ahead of the Jubilee of Migrants.

Menjivar, who was born in El Salvador and is a migrant himself, said that in the United States "the anti-migrant rhetoric is very loud, but I would say it is not a majority." In response, he said, the pope has acted as a sort of counterbalance to the increasingly hostile attitudes toward migrants.

"What the pope has been saying is wonderful. It gives a voice to migrants, it gives a voice to common sense," the bishop said. "Saying I am pro-life, but I don't want to give citizenship to the children of migrants. I mean, what kind of pro-life is that?"



Washington Auxiliary Bishop Evelio Menjivar-Ayala poses for a photo in Rome Oct. 3, 2025, ahead of the Jubilee for Migrants. (Courtesy Ellie Hidalgo)

The pope's comments at Castel Gandolfo were only one part of a week that had migration high on the Vatican's agenda.

On Oct. 2, Leo met at the Vatican with Amy Pope, director general of the International Organization for Migration. Speaking with Vatican News, Pope said the two discussed the impacts of humanitarian funding cuts on support for migrants and "the importance of reframing the issue of migration at a moment in time where

polarization is at an all-time high."

The pope, she said, "provides a level of moral authority to communities around the world, and that's really important at this moment in time when the issue of migration has become, as I mentioned, hyper politicized and polarized."

Later that day, Leo addressed a gathering of academics and church leaders taking part in a three-day conference on "Refugees and Migrants in Our Common Home," organized by Villanova University and co-sponsored by various Vatican dicasteries.

In that address, Leo urged Catholic universities and research institutes to place "the dignity of every human person at the center of any solution" to the global migration crisis, which he noted now affects more than 100 million people.

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Pope Leo XIV receives a painting from Sister Norma Pimentel, an artist, a Missionary of Jesus

Pope Leo XIV receives a painting from Sister Norma Pimentel, an artist, a Missionary of Jesus and executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in Brownsville, Texas, during an audience at the Vatican Oct. 2, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

He proposed two guiding themes for their work: reconciliation and hope. Warning against what he called a "globalization of powerlessness" that leaves people feeling "immobile, silent, perhaps sad" in the face of suffering, Leo insisted that migrants themselves are "privileged witnesses of hope through their resilience and their trust in God."

Participants in the conference said Leo's continuation of Pope Francis' concern for migrants is galvanizing efforts across Catholic universities to turn church teaching into concrete action.

While discourse around human dignity and migration "has ceased to be mainstream," Anika Hinze, a political scientist at Fordham University who participated in the conference, said that "to have a powerful institution like the Catholic Church, and a person that has the visibility of someone like Pope Leo, throw their weight behind that is really meaningful and very needed in this current

context."

Jesuit Fr. Alejandro Olayo-Méndez, a professor at Boston College who researches migration and asylum seekers, said that following Pope Francis' advocacy for migrants he sees Leo as someone who can "institutionalize that vision." He noted how Catholic universities began increasingly studying migration as a result of Francis, and now Leo "hasn't taken his finger off of migration as a key issue."

In a tangible sign of that emphasis placed on migration, Villanova University, Leo's alma mater, inaugurated the Mother Cabrini Institute on Immigration at the Vatican to begin the week. Its founding director, law professor Michele Pistone, said the institute is her direct response to papal appeals for Catholic universities to address migration in a more systematic way.



Michele Pistone, a law professor founding faculty director of Villanova University's Mother Cabrini Institute on Immigration, speaks at the inauguration of the institute at the Vatican Sept. 30, 2025. (courtesy Mother Cabrini Institute on Immigration)

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"In 2017, Pope Francis called on Catholic colleges and universities to do more teaching, research and social promotion on migrants and refugees, and I read that and it changed me," Pistone told NCR. The Cabrini Institute, she said, "is my response to that call, and now Pope Leo is continuing that call."

With migration a flashpoint in American politics, Pistone said that Catholic research institutes can help shift the debate from polemics to proposing constructive solutions.

"We need fresh ideas," she said. "Across the board people see that the system is broken, but we don't know how to fix it. What we're trying to do is look at the deeper structures that created this situation and ask how to respond in a way that respects both the common good and human dignity — the core teachings of the church."

As the Mass for missionaries and migrants concluded in St. Peter's Square, Leo told pilgrims that "the church is entirely missionary and is one great people journeying towards the Kingdom of God."

"But no one should be forced to flee, nor exploited or mistreated because of their situation as foreigners or people in need," he said. "Human dignity must always come first."

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