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Believers watch the canonization ceremony of José Gregorio Hernández and Mother Carmen Rendiles Martínez by Pope Leo XIV during an event to celebrate Venezuela's first saints at a square in Caracas, Venezuela, Oct. 19, 2025. (AP/Ariana Cubillos)

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Pope Leo XIV canonized Venezuela's beloved "doctor of the poor" Sunday, Oct. 19, before tens of thousands of people, offering the South American nation one of its first saints and a reason to celebrate amid a yearslong economic crisis and new tensions with the United States.

José Gregorio Hernández, revered by millions for his dedication to poor people, was declared a saint alongside the founder of a Venezuelan religious order, Mother Carmen Rendiles Martínez, at a Mass in St. Peter's Square that Leo called a "great celebration of holiness."

Thousands of jubilant Venezuelans filled the square and draped Venezuelan flags on its police barricades, adding splashes of red, blue and yellow that perfectly matched the uniforms of the attending Swiss Guards.

Thousands more who couldn't travel to Rome gathered overnight in the Caracas plaza outside the Nuestra Señora de La Candelaria church, where a 26-foot (8-meter) statue of Hernández stands, and watched the Mass from Rome on a giant screen.

"It's good news after so much sadness," Ana Sanabria, a 71-year-old homemaker, said as she watched the fireworks in Caracas.



Pope Leo XIV presides over a Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, during which he canonized seven new saints of the Catholic Church, Oct. 19, 2025. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

The Mass, which the Vatican said drew some 70,000 people, also gave Papua New Guinea its first saint: Peter To Rot, a layman killed in prison in 1945 for standing up for monogamous marriage at a time when polygamy was practiced. In all, seven people were canonized in a ceremony that Pope Francis put in motion in some of his final acts as pope.

In fact, Francis approved Hernández's canonization from his hospital room on Feb. 24, agreeing to bypass the Vatican's typical miracle confirmation process to pronounce him a saint based on the "widespread veneration of the 'doctor-saint' among the faithful," the Vatican said.

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro thanked Francis for intervening, after years of petitions from ordinary faithful and the Venezuelan Catholic hierarchy.

"Today, we have raised a prayer for the eternal spirit of he who is going to be a saint, also for Pope Francis, who gave this beautiful gift to Venezuela," Maduro said in Caracas after the Mass.

A beloved doctor and an icon after death

Hernández is beloved among Venezuelans, with his face plastered on street art around Caracas, in portraits in hospitals and in photos gracing individual home altars.

As a doctor in Caracas during the late 1800s and early 1900s, he refused to take money from poor people for his services and often gave them money for medicine, earning the nickname "doctor of the poor." He was killed in a road accident in 1919 while crossing a street shortly after picking up some medicine at a pharmacy to bring to a poor elderly woman.



In Caracas, Venezuela, Oct. 19, 2025, believers carry a statue of José Gregorio Hernández during an event to celebrate his canonization. (AP/Ariana Cubillos)

He became a religious icon after his death, and when Pope John Paul II visited Venezuela in 1996, he received a petition signed by 5 million people — almost one in four Venezuelans — asking that he declare Hernández a saint.

"For them, this is indeed a national event of the highest order," said Silvia Correale, who spearheaded his sainthood case. "Certainly, the canonization of José Gregorio is desired by all the Venezuelan people, and has been waited for by all the people."

José Ramon Malavecontreras, a Venezuelan resident in Rome, said his mother named him after Hernández.

"They believed I'd be stillborn, so she dedicated his name to me for saving my life," he said Sunday in St. Peter's. "Therefore, this moment was unmissable for me. I couldn't fail to be here."

In Caracas, Arquímides Blanco, 60, said he wasn't a particular fan of Hernández but recognized the significance of his canonization for Venezuela now. Blanco belongs to a cultural collective commissioned to paint the streets ahead of the canonization.

"I may not be a big fan of José Gregorio as such, but I understand that he is Venezuelan and that his canonization in the context of the whole geopolitical situation is important," he said.

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A celebration amid tensions

The canonization was a long-awaited celebration and a boost for Venezuela, just weeks after Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado won the Nobel Peace Prize. It comes as tensions mount with the United States over Washington's use of military force against suspected drug cartels.

Just this past week, U.S. President Donald Trump confirmed that he authorized the CIA to conduct covert operations inside Venezuela and said he was weighing the execution of land operations in the South American country.

Venezuela's economy has been in crisis for the past decade, compounded by U.S. sanctions and spurring the emigration of millions of Venezuelans, first to other South

American nations and then, in more recent years, to the United States.

The government of Maduro — sworn in last year despite credible evidence he lost reelection — has been forced to cut subsidies, making many daily necessities unaffordable to the 80% of residents estimated to live in poverty.



Faithful and pilgrims from Venezuela listen to Pope Leo XIV presiding over a Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, during which he canonized seven new saints of the Catholic Church, Oct. 19, 2025. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

Other new saints

In his homily, Leo held up all seven new saints as models for today's Catholics who carried "the lamp of the faith."

"May their intercession assist us in our trials and their example inspire us in our shared vocation to holiness," he said.

Also canonized Sunday were Archbishop Ignazio Choukrallah Maloyan, an Armenian Catholic who was killed for refusing to renounce his faith during what the Vatican has said was the Ottoman era genocide of Armenians; Sr. Vincenza Maria Poloni, a 19th-century founder of a religious order; Sr. Maria Troncatti, an Italian missionary in Ecuador; and Bartolo Longo, who like Hernandez was canonized based on widespread veneration among the faithful, not a purported miraculous healing.

[Rueda contributed from Caracas, Venezuela. Juan Arraez in Caracas, and Luigi Navarra, Silvia Stellacci and Maria Selene Clemente in Vatican City contributed to this report.]