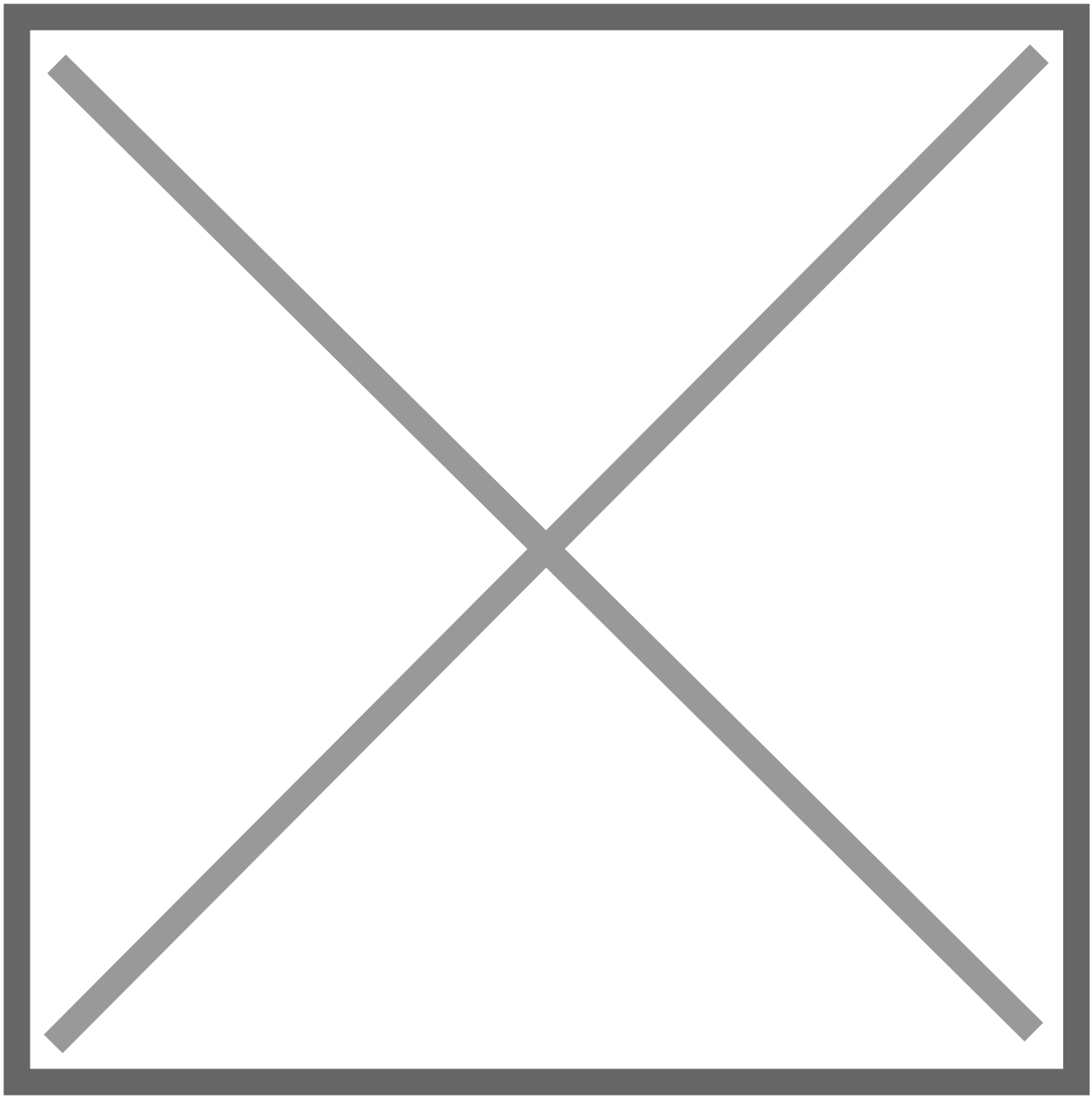
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As seen from inside the Porziuncola, the small church where St. Francis founded the Franciscan order, Pope Leo XIV speaks to members of the Italian bishops' conference holding the final session of their fall meeting in the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels in Assisi, Italy, Nov. 20, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

by Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service

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Assisi, Italy — November 20, 2025
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Following the example of St. Francis of Assisi, bishops are called to be close to the people in their dioceses and peacemakers in a world marked by division and tension, Pope Leo XIV told the bishops of Italy.

Standing in front of the Porziuncola, the small church where St. Francis founded the Franciscan order, Leo said bishops must be "artisans of friendship, fraternity and authentic relationships within our communities, where — without reluctance or fear — we must listen to and harmonize tensions, cultivating a culture of encounter and thus becoming a prophecy of peace for the world."

Leo traveled to Assisi by helicopter Nov. 20 to speak at the closing session of the fall meeting of the Italian bishops' conference. The session was closed to the press, but the Vatican released the pope's text and some video clips of his speech a few hours later.

Before joining the bishops in the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, which encloses the Porziuncola, Leo prayed with dozens of friars at the tomb of St. Francis in the basilica named after him.

And after his meeting with the bishops, he flew by helicopter to Montefalco to celebrate Mass and have lunch with the cloistered Augustinian nuns at the Monastery of St. Clare of the Cross.

Leo's talk to the bishops focused on the Italian church's ongoing synod process. But he also spoke of practical matters, including the need to continue combining smaller Italian dioceses and indicating that he would be accepting more bishops' resignations when they reached the mandatory retirement age of 75 than Francis

did.

The challenge of evangelization and the falling population of many Italian cities and towns "ask us not to go backward on the matter of merging dioceses," he told them.

Italy, which has about 57.3 million Catholics, has 224 dioceses; 41 of those have been joined to another diocese "in the person of the bishop," without formally suppressing or uniting the dioceses. By contrast, the 75.5 million Catholics in the United States belong to 194 dioceses, the Archdiocese for the Military Services or the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter.

"A synodal church that walks along the furrows of history while facing the emerging challenges of evangelization needs constant renewal," the pope told the bishops. "We must avoid allowing inertia — however well-intentioned — to slow necessary changes."

As part of that, he said, "we must all cultivate that interior attitude Pope Francis had described as 'learning how to take our leave,' a precious disposition when one must prepare to step down from office."

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"It is good that the norm of age 75 for ordinaries concluding their service in dioceses be respected," Leo said, "and only in the case of cardinals may the continuation of their ministry be considered, possibly for another two years."

As bishops and as a church, he said, "Fixing our gaze on the face of Jesus enables us to look into the faces of our brothers and sisters. It is his love that moves us toward them. And faith in him, our peace, calls us to offer everyone the gift of his peace."

At a time "marked by fractures, both nationally and internationally," the pope said, "messages and language steeped in hostility and violence often spread; the race for efficiency leaves the most vulnerable behind; technological omnipotence compresses freedom; loneliness consumes hope, while numerous uncertainties weigh on our future like unknowns."

Being a "synodal church," he said, means "walking together, walking with everyone," which requires "being a church that lives among the people, welcomes their

questions, soothes their sufferings and shares their hopes."

That attitude, Leo told them, must include special attention to the most vulnerable people "so that a culture of prevention of every form of abuse may also develop."

"The welcome and listening offered to victims are the authentic mark of a church which, in communal conversion, knows how to acknowledge wounds and strives to heal them, because 'where pain is deep, even stronger must be the hope that is born of communion,'" the pope said.

Leo also encouraged the bishops to pay special attention to "the challenge posed to us by the digital world."

"Pastoral ministry cannot be limited to 'using' the media," he said, but it must "educate people to inhabit the digital sphere in a human way, without allowing truth to be lost behind the multiplication of connections, so that the internet may truly become a space of freedom, responsibility and fraternity."

This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** feature series. View the full series.