Vatican

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Pope Leo XIV leaves after a Mass for the Jubilee of the Choirs in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Sunday, Nov. 23, 2025. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Read this next: Pope Leo's first trip to spotlight political, religious unity in time of fracture

Pope Leo XIV is embarking on his first foreign trip, a pilgrimage to Turkey and Lebanon that would be delicate under any circumstances but is even more fraught given Mideast tensions and the media glare that will document history's first American pope on the road.

Leo is fulfilling a trip Pope Francis planned to make, to mark an important anniversary with the Orthodox church in Turkey. In Lebanon, he'll try to boost a long-suffering Christian community as well as Lebanese of all faiths who are still demanding justice over the 2020 Beirut port blast.

Leo, who spent 12 years as superior of his Augustinian religious order and two decades as a missionary in Peru, says he loves to travel. And in recent weeks, he has shown both diplomatic and linguistic dexterity in answering questions on the fly from reporters.

The trip is being covered closely by U.S. media, with all major U.S. networks — ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox as well as CNN and the BBC — inside Leo's travelling pool, following his speeches, homilies and prayers at a crucial moment in negotiations to end Russia's war in Ukraine and maintain a cease-fire in Gaza.

Vatican correspondents plus Lebanese and Turkish media round out the papal press corps of about 80 journalists, with an ample waitlist of reporters who applied to be on the papal plane but were denied a seat because of limited space.

"Anytime the pope travels, it's a big deal," said Natalia Imperatori-Lee, associate professor of theology at Fordham University in New York.

But an American pope on his first foreign trip is an even bigger deal, she said, especially in the saturated American media ecosystem where Leo has emerged as something of a foil to the Trump administration and its crackdown on immigrants.

"He is still driving coverage here because of his engagement with one of the most important issues we're facing, which is migration," said Kim Daniels, director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University. Because of that, "I think this trip will drive attention again to the peripheries and to

the vulnerable."

Significantly, Leo plans to deliver all his remarks in Turkey in English, and English and French in Lebanon, casting aside the Italian lingua franca of the Vatican in favor of languages that are more widely understood.

Pope's trip to Turkey and Lebanon



1. **Thursday, Nov. 27:** Pope Leo XIV departs **Rome** for **Ankara, Turkey**
2. Following arrival in **Ankara** and visit to Attaturk mausoleum, visits with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan; meets civil authorities and diplomatic corps; departs for **Istanbul**
3. **Friday, Nov. 28:** Meets with bishops and others; visits nursing home of Little Sisters of the Poor; departs for **Iznik**
4. Leads ecumenical prayer service near ancient basilica; returns to **Istanbul** for private meeting with bishops
5. **Saturday, Nov. 29:** Events include visit to a mosque, meetings with church leaders including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and Mass at Volkswagen Arena
6. **Sunday, Nov. 30:** Events include visit to Armenian Apostolic Cathedral, ceremonies at Patriarchal Church of St. George, lunch with Bartholomew I, departure for **Beirut, Lebanon**
7. Events in **Beirut** include meetings with Lebanese president, president of the National Assembly, prime minister and other officials
8. **Monday, Dec. 1:** Events include visits to **Annaya, Harissa, Bkerke** and meetings with ecumenical leaders and young people in **Beirut**
9. **Tuesday, Dec. 2:** Events include visit to a hospital in Jal Ed Dib, prayer at the site of 2020 Beirut port explosion, Mass at the Beirut waterfront before departing for **Rome**

Source: AP reports; The Vatican

AP

Major stops on the pope's trip to Turkey and Lebanon. (AP)

All eyes will be on Leo's in-flight press conference Dec. 2 returning to Rome. These encounters provided many of Francis' headline-grabbing quips during his 12-year papacy, starting with his first in 2013 when he famously said "Who am I to judge" about a purportedly gay priest.

Leo has shown himself to be far more prudent and diplomatic than his predecessor. But "maybe he'll do something crazy like a 'Who am I to judge?'" said Imperatori-Lee.

An important moment in Catholic-Orthodox relations

The main impetus for traveling to Turkey, the first stop in the Nov. 27-Dec. 2 trip, is to mark the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, Christianity's first ecumenical council.

Leo will pray with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, at the site of the 325 AD gathering — today's Iznik — and sign a joint declaration in a visible sign of Christian unity.

Eastern and Western churches were united until the Great Schism of 1054, a divide precipitated largely by disagreements over the primacy of the pope.

"We all understand that 1,000 years of division has inflicted a deep wound that cannot be healed easily," Bartholomew told the respected Greek daily Kathimerini recently. "We have an obligation, however, to strive to heal that wound, mend the injuries, bridge the distances and restore unity."

A chance to speak about Mideast peace

The visit will also offer Leo several occasions to speak about regional tensions overall, Catholic-Muslim relations and Christians' dwindling presence in the Middle East.

Clergy in the region say the Vatican's strong support for Palestinians in Gaza during Israel's war, first under Francis and now Leo, has bolstered the church's credibility among ordinary Muslims.

"In a moment when many Western powers hesitated on the question of Gaza, Francis — and then Leo — was very strong. He didn't go to Gaza but everything he could have said it seems he said," said Fr. Paolo Pugliese, superior of the Capuchin friars in Turkey.

The regional conflicts have not abated, however: Israel fired an airstrike on Lebanon's capital on Sunday that killed Hezbollah's chief of staff and four others.

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Security expected to be tight

The strike only reinforced security concerns that often accompany pope trips. But organizers insisted Leo would be safe.

"It happened, but it doesn't affect the places or where the pope is going," said Bishop George Bacouni, archbishop of the Melkite Greek Catholic Archeparchy of Beirut.

The Vatican said no extra security measures had been taken, though spokesman Matteo Bruni declined to say whether Leo's cars and popemobiles were bullet-proofed.

Significantly, Leo will not visit Lebanon's south, battered by last year's war between Israel and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and the site of intensified Israeli strikes in recent weeks. Christians groups in southern Lebanon had lobbied for the pope to visit the area and circulated a new petition just this week.

At most Leo might be bothered in Beirut by Israeli drones that fly overhead, organizers said.

A prayer at the port blast site

The highlight of the Lebanese visit comes on Leo's last day, Dec. 2, when he spends time in silent prayer at the site of the Aug. 4, 2020, Beirut port blast.

The explosion tore through the Lebanese capital, killing at least 218 people, wounding more than 6,000 and devastating large swaths of Beirut. Sparked when

hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate detonated in a warehouse, the blast caused billions of dollars in damage.

Lebanese citizens were enraged by the blast, which appeared to be the result of government negligence, coming on top of an economic crisis spurred by decades of corruption and financial crimes. But an investigation has repeatedly stalled, and five years on, no official has been convicted.

There are hopes among Lebanese that Leo will demand accountability from Lebanon's political class, and insist that there can be no peace without truth and justice.

Such an appeal "could shake up our various political leaders, because we continue to live under the pressure of a social crisis, an economic crisis, in a country where the various leaders hear neither the cry of the poor, nor the cry of the unfortunate, nor the cry of citizens," said Msgr. Cesar Essayan, apostolic vicar of Beirut for Latin rite Catholics.

Another important moment will come when Leo meets with young Lebanese. He is expected to give them words of encouragement, amid the decades-long flight of Lebanese abroad, while also acknowledging their disillusionment over the failures of adults.

"Many families feel that they are surviving the day by day with really very little visibility on the future," said Marielle Boutros, project coordinator in Lebanon for Aid to the Church in Need, the Catholic charity. "So this visit of His Holiness, it's not simply symbolic. It is a really concrete sign that Lebanon is not forgotten."

This story appears in the **Pope Leo in Turkey and Lebanon** feature series. View the full series.