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Pope Leo XIV is welcomed to the presidential palace in Ankara, Turkey, by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan Nov. 27, 2025, the first stop on Pope Leo's first foreign papal trip. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Ankara, Turkey — November 27, 2025
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Thrust onto the international stage for the first time since his election, Pope Leo XIV advocated for harmony and dialogue in a moment marked by deep global fracture.

"Human communities are increasingly polarized and torn apart by extreme positions that fragment them," Leo told government officials in Turkey's capital shortly after landing in Ankara Nov. 27. His remarks set the tone for his six-day visit through Turkey and Lebanon that is expected to blend diplomacy, interreligious outreach and mark a major ecumenical milestone.

The journey, planned originally for Pope Francis but pushed back following his hospitalization in February and death in April, was conceived to commemorate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea — the early Christian assembly in what is now northwestern Turkey that produced the profession of faith still recited by Catholics, Orthodox Christians and many other Christian communities today.

Leo, less than seven months into his pontificate, has chosen to pick up his predecessor's itinerary and place unity at the center of his first journey abroad.



Pope Leo XIV receives a mini pumpkin pie from Cindy Wooden, editor-in-chief of Catholic News Service, during his Thanksgiving flight Nov. 27, 2025, to Turkey. Elise Allen, senior correspondent of Crux, prepares to hand the pope a full pie. (CNS/Claudio Lavanga)

"I very much have been looking forward to this trip because of what it means for all Christians, but it's also a great message to the whole world," the pope told the journalists flying with him shortly after taking off from Rome, adding that he hoped his visits to Turkey and Lebanon will "announce, transmit, proclaim, how important peace is throughout the world."

The flight marked the first international trip for a pope in almost a full calendar year, following Francis' final trip to Ajaccio, France, last December.

And Leo's differences from Francis already showed in the nearly three-hour plane ride to Ankara from Rome. He spoke almost exclusively in English during his greetings to journalists accompanying him on his flight, skirting the Vatican working language of Italian.

And his first words of greeting were to offer the Americans on board a happy Thanksgiving: "It's a wonderful day to celebrate and I want to begin by saying 'thank you' to each and every one of you," he said.

The first pope from the United States was also given quintessentially American gifts by some journalists: pumpkin pie, a baseball bat and pairs of socks and slippers from his favorite team, the Chicago White Sox.

At 70, Leo has also adopted a brisker schedule than Francis typically kept. Unlike his predecessor, the pope's schedule does not include the large break in the middle of his days' activities, as became the norm for Francis during his travels.



Pope Leo XIV arrives by plane from Rome in Ankara, Turkey, Nov. 27, 2025, at the beginning of his first international papal trip. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

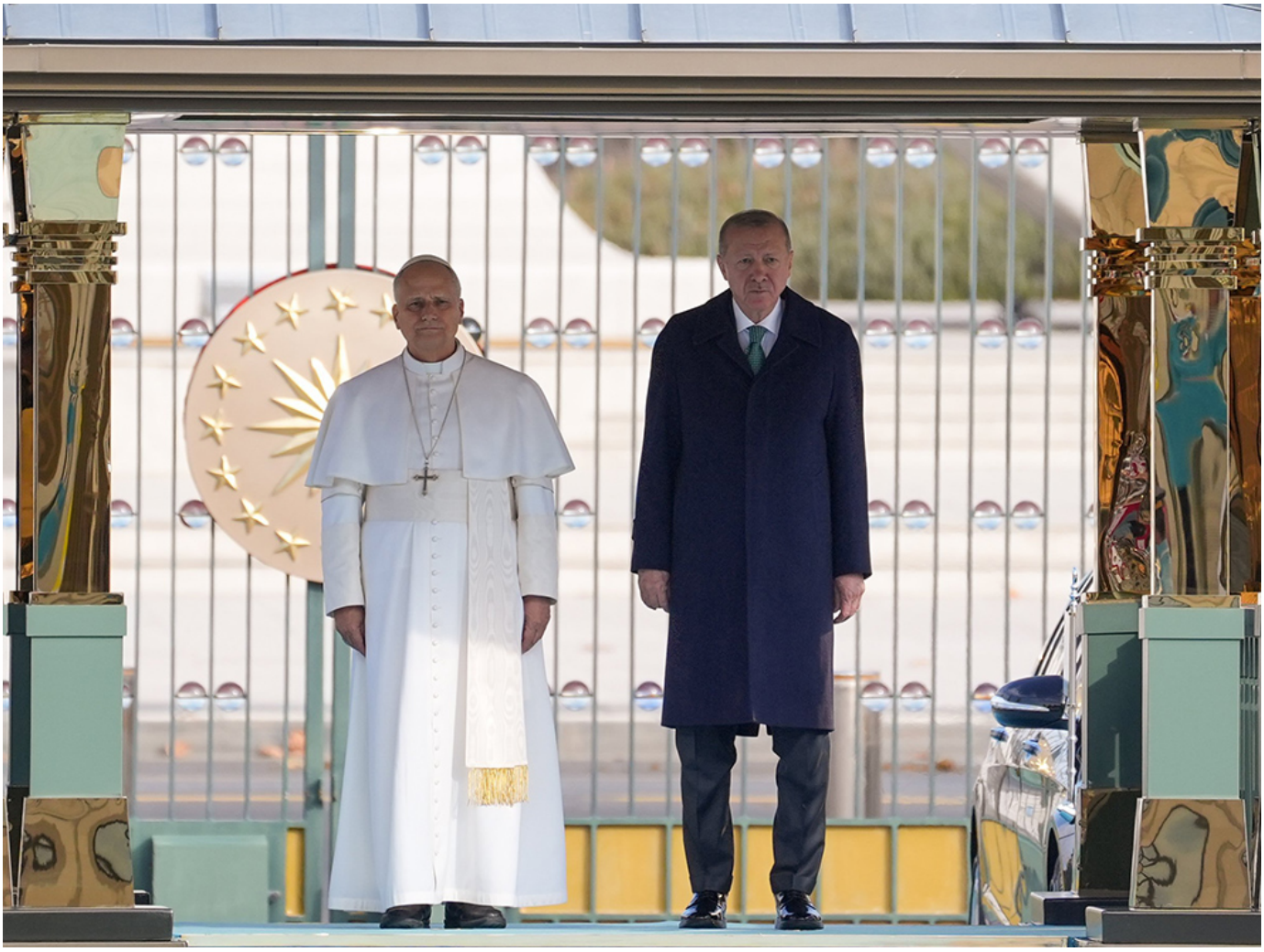
Pope to Turkish officials

The pope's first visit abroad is to a country where Muslims make up some 99% of the population. Christians, by contrast, account for less than 1% per the Turkish government, with Catholics making up some 0.04%, according to Vatican statistics.

Speaking to government officials in Turkey, where the number of Christians has steadily declined since the early 20th-century and the country's Muslim-majority has been greatly consolidated, Leo said that "uniformity would be an impoverishment."

"A society is alive if it has a plurality, for what makes it a civil society are the bridges that link its people together," the pope told government leaders at the Nation's Library in Ankara. "I willingly assure you that Christians desire to contribute positively to the unity of your country."

He also highlighted the growing contributions of women to Turkish society, noting they "are increasingly placing themselves at the service of your country and its positive influence on the international scene." Supporting families and valuing "the contribution that women make toward the full flowering of social life" remains essential, he added.



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Before addressing officials, Leo met privately with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Ankara remains one of the few capitals maintaining active dialogue with both Ukraine and Russia, and the encounter came as the United States pushes for a negotiated end to the war in Ukraine.

Just a week prior, Erdogan had hosted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and suggested Istanbul could serve as a venue for direct talks between the warring parties. Welcoming the pope and members of the Vatican delegation, including officials from the Secretariat of State and cardinals involved in interreligious and ecumenical affairs, Erdogan said Turkey is "striving to offer the necessary support and contributions" to renewed peace efforts in Ukraine.

Turning to the war in Gaza, Erdogan praised Leo and his predecessors for their support of Palestine and a two-state solution with Israel. He also recalled the Israeli strike on Gaza's only Catholic parish in Gaza City, which killed three and injured 10, calling for full enforcement of the current ceasefire.

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In his public remarks, Leo told the government officials that "today, more than ever, we need people who will promote dialogue and practice it with firm will and patient resolve."

Global wars, "fueled by prevailing strategies of economic and military power" threaten the future of humanity by diverting resources away from the real challenges of humanity, namely "peace, the fight against hunger and poverty, health and education, and the protection of creation."

The pope also stated that local policies and international relations must rise to the challenge of regulating artificial intelligence and other technological developments "that could otherwise exacerbate injustice instead of helping to overcome it."

"Let us work together, therefore, to change the trajectory of development and repair the damage already done to the unity of our human family," he said.

Pivot toward ecumenism

After his first day in Turkey, Leo's trip will sharply pivot away from diplomacy toward ecumenical dialogue, developing another dimension of unity that the pope said was the impetus for his trip.

In Istanbul, Leo will begin his day meeting with those who tend to the miniscule Catholic community, estimated to make up 0.04% of Turkey's population.

He will then travel to the site of ancient Nicaea for the primary mission of his trip: to pray with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians to mark the anniversary of the most consequential ecumenical council in Christian history.

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