Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Leo XIV, center, walking with Muezzin Musa Asgın Tunca, left, Dr. Emrullah Tuncel, second from left, and Imam of Mosque Sultanahmet Fatih Kaya, visits the Sultan Ahmed Mosque in Istanbul Nov. 29. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

Nicole Winfield

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Istanbul — November 29, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Leo XIV visited Istanbul's iconic Blue Mosque today (Nov. 29) but didn't stop to pray, as he opened an intense day of meetings and liturgies with Turkey's Christian leaders, where he again emphasized the need for Christians to be united.

Leo took off his shoes and, in his white socks, toured the 17th-century mosque, looking up at its soaring tiled domes and the Arabic inscriptions on its columns as an imam pointed them out to him.

The Vatican had said Leo would observe a "brief moment of silent prayer" in the mosque, but he didn't. An imam of the mosque, Asgin Tunca, said he had invited Leo to pray, since the mosque was "Allah's house," but the pope declined.

Later, Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said: "The pope experienced his visit to the mosque in silence, in a spirit of contemplation and listening, with deep respect for the place and the faith of those who gather there in prayer."

The Vatican then sent out a corrected version of its bulletin about the trip, removing reference to the planned "brief moment of silent prayer," without further explanation.

Leo, history's first U.S.-born pope, was following in the footsteps of his recent predecessors, who all made high-profile visits to the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, as it is officially known, in a gesture of respect to Turkey's Muslim majority.

Papal visits to Blue Mosque often raise questions

But the visits have always raised questions about whether the pope would pray in the Muslim house of worship, or at the very least pause to gather thoughts in a meditative silence.



Locals and tourists visit the Ottoman-era Sultan Ahmed or Blue Mosque, in Istanbul, Turkey, Nov. 21, 2025, ahead of the visit of Pope Leo XIV to Turkey. Leo visited the mosque Nov. 29. (AP/Francisco Seco)

When Pope Benedict XVI visited Turkey in 2006, tensions were high because Benedict had offended many in the Muslim world a few months earlier with a speech in Regensburg, Germany, that was widely interpreted as linking Islam and violence.

The Vatican added a visit to the Blue Mosque at the last minute in a bid to reach out to Muslims, and Benedict was warmly welcomed. He observed a moment of silent prayer, head bowed, as the imam prayed next to him, facing east.

Benedict later thanked him "for this moment of prayer" for what was only the second time a pope had visited a mosque, after St. John Paul II visited one briefly in Syria in 2001.

There were no doubts in 2014 when Pope Francis visited the Blue Mosque: He stood for two minutes of silent prayer facing east, his head bowed, eyes closed and hands clasped in front of him. The Grand Mufti of Istanbul, Rahmi Yaran, told the pope

afterwards, "May God accept it."



Pope Leo XIV and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, right, leave at the end of an ecumenical prayer service near the archaeological site of the ancient Basilica of Saint Neophytos in Iznik, Turkey, on Nov. 28. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

With Leo, though, even the Vatican seemed caught off guard by his decision not to pray. The Holy See had to correct the official record of the visit after it originally kept the planned reference to him pausing for a moment of prayer.

Speaking to reporters after the visit, the imam Tunca said he had told the pope: "It's not my house, not your house, (it's the) house of Allah," he said. He said he told Leo: " 'If you want, you can worship here,' I said. But he said, 'That’s OK.' "

"He wanted to see the mosque, wanted to feel (the) atmosphere of the mosque, I think. And was very pleased," he said.

There was another change to the official program, after the Vatican said the head of Turkey's Diyanet religious affairs directorate would accompany Leo at the mosque.

He didn't come and a spokesman from the Diyanet said he wasn't supposed to, since he had welcomed Leo in Ankara.

Hagia Sophia left off itinerary

Past popes have also visited the nearby Hagia Sophia landmark, once one of the most important historic cathedrals in Christianity and a United Nations-designated world heritage site.

But Leo left that visit off his itinerary on his first trip as pope. In July 2020, Turkey converted Hagia Sophia from a museum back into a mosque, a move that drew widespread international criticism, including from the Vatican.

Advertisement

After the mosque visit, Leo met privately with Turkey's Christian leaders at the Syriac Orthodox Church of Mor Ephrem. In the afternoon, he was expected to pray with the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, Patriarch Bartholomew, at the patriarchal church of St. George.

There, they were to sign a joint statement. The Vatican said in his remarks to the patriarchs gathered, Leo reminded them "that division among Christians is an obstacle to their witness."

He pointed to the next Holy Year to be celebrated by Christians, in 2033 on the anniversary of Christ's crucifixion, and invited them to go to Jerusalem on "a journey that leads to full unity."



Orthodox clerics wait for Pope Leo XIV to arrive for a doxology service at the Patriarchal Church of St. George, in Istanbul, Turkey, Nov. 29. (AP/Francisco Seco)

Leo was ending the day with a Catholic Mass in Istanbul's Volkswagen Arena for the country's Catholic community, who number 33,000 in a country of more than 85 million people, most of whom are Sunni Muslim.

Airbus software update doesn't spare pope

While Leo was focusing on bolstering relations with Orthodox Christians and Muslims, trip organizers were dealing with more mundane issues.

Leo's ITA Airways Airbus A320neo charter was among those caught up in the worldwide Airbus software update, ordered by the European Union Aviation Safety Agency. The order came after an analysis found the computer code may have contributed to a sudden drop in the altitude of a JetBlue plane last month.

The Vatican spokesman, Bruni, said Nov. 29 that ITA was working on the issue. He said the necessary component to update the aircraft was on its way to Istanbul

along with the technician who would install it.

Leo is scheduled to fly from Istanbul to Beirut, Lebanon, Nov. 30 for the second leg of his inaugural trip as pope.

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