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Pope Leo XIV greets the faithful as he walks after presiding over the Holy Mass at the Volkswa

Pope Leo XIV greets the faithful as he walks after presiding over the Holy Mass at the Volkswagen Arena, during his first apostolic journey, in Istanbul, Turkey, Nov. 29. About 5,000 people attended the Mass. (OSV News/Reuters/Umit Bektas)



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Istanbul — November 29, 2025
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Pope Leo XIV called on the world's religious communities to break down "the walls of prejudice and mistrust" that divide them at his first Mass abroad, rounding out a day of interreligious outreach and renewed appeals for Christian unity that included a pointed hint at a possible trip to Jerusalem in 2033.

The pope celebrated Mass with some 5,000 people, many foreign-born Catholics, in an intimate Istanbul arena on Nov. 29, his last full day in Turkey.

Meeting earlier with leaders of Christian communities in Turkey, the pope invited all Christians "to embark together on the spiritual journey that leads to the Jubilee of

Redemption in 2033, with a view of returning to Jerusalem, to the upper room, the place of Jesus' Last Supper, and the place of Pentecost, a journey that leads to full unity," the Vatican said.

While not a formal invitation or an official announcement, the reference to Jerusalem sets the church's sights on a significant milestone to mark Christian unity following the ecumenical ceremony to commemorate the Council of Nicaea which Leo participated in Nov. 28.

Pope Leo XIV and Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople hand each c

Pope Leo XIV and Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople hand each other copies of a joint declaration they signed Nov. 29 at the end of a prayer service in the Patriarchal Cathedral of St. George in Istanbul. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

And in the afternoon Leo signed a joint declaration with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians. The two newly stated their hope for full communion between the Catholic and Orthodox churches and called on those hesitant of dialogue between Christian churches to work toward "reconciliation and unity."

Breaking with predecessors at Blue Mosque

Leo, who largely sticks to the script at public events, gave journalists their first surprise of his six-day trip to the Middle East when he opted not to pray at Istanbul's famed Blue Mosque the morning of Nov. 29.

The Vatican program for his visit stated that the pope would offer a silent prayer during his tour around the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, just as Pope Benedict XIV and Francis had done during their visits there.

Leo took off his shoes upon entering the mosque in a sign of respect, walking across the carpeted floor in white socks and looked around the grand space, but he did not appear to take a moment's pause during his guided tour.



People stand at the window of a building in the compound of the Patriarchal Church of Saint George where Pope Leo XIV and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew attended the Doxology in Istanbul Nov. 29. (AP/Emrah Gurel)

Asgin Tunca, the mosque's muzzein responsible for calling the Muslim faithful to prayer, told reporters after the visit that the pope did not stop to pray while there.

"If you like to worship, you can worship here," he said he told the pope, "but he said, 'no, I am just going to look around,' " Tunca told journalists.

The Vatican later said that Leo lived his experience of the mosque "in a spirit of contemplation and listening."

Benedict prayed side by side with the mosque's imam during his highly scrutinized visit to the country in 2006.

Then, Benedict was met in Istanbul with protests for comments he made at a lecture at the University of Regensburg in Bavaria just weeks before. There he quoted a 14th-century Byzantine emperor who said that the prophet Muhammad had brought about "things only evil and inhuman."

And during his 2014 visit, Francis stopped in a moment of "silent adoration," as the Vatican spokesperson at the time called it, with his eyes closed and his hands clasped for more than three minutes alongside the Grand Mufti of Istanbul Mehmet Görmez.

Advancing efforts toward Christian unity

A day after praying side-by-side to commemorate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the impetus of the pope's trip to Turkey, Leo and Bartholomew met privately before signing their joint declaration.

> 'The division among Christians is an obstacle to their witness.'
> —Pope Leo XIV
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The religious leaders stated their shared desire to find a path toward establishing a common date for the celebration of Easter and appealed to political leaders "to do everything possible to ensure that the tragedy of war ceases immediately."

Additionally, Leo and Bartholomew affirmed their belief that "authentic interreligious dialogue, far from being a cause of syncretism and confusion, is essential for the coexistence of peoples of different traditions and cultures."

Both the pope and the patriarch met with other Christian leaders at the Syriac Orthodox Church of Mor Ephrem; the Vatican said that Leo asked the group to pray that more meetings like those commemorating the Council of Nicaea can be organized "also with those churches that could not have been present."

Notably, no representatives from the Russian Orthodox Church, which unilaterally severed communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2018, attended the ecumenical prayer ceremony in Iznik Nov. 28.

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Leo told the other Christian leaders that "the division among Christians is an obstacle to their witness."

Welcoming Leo to a prayer service before Mass, Bartholomew said that by choosing to commemorate the Council of Nicaea on his first trip as pope will strengthen his papal ministry "marked by the willingness to serve the Lord's call towards Christian unity."

An intimate papal Mass in Istanbul

Leo closed a day in which he operated as a bridge builder by celebrating Mass with the tiny Catholic community present in Turkey.



A woman shows her T-shirt as she arrives for a Mass led by Pope Leo XIV at the Volkswagen Arena venue, in Istanbul, Turkey, Nov. 29. (AP/Dilara Acikgoz)

A large group from Spain was present in the arena's upper rows and flags from Italy and Mozambique were visible among the diverse crowd.

Just as he did at the ancient site of Nicaea, Leo again lamented in his homily the state of the world "where religion is too often used to justify wars and atrocities."

But even among Turkey's estimated 0.02% Christian population, Leo said different denominations must practice "a catholicity that unites."

"The unity that binds us together around the altar is a gift from God," he said, adding that "unity needs care, attention and maintenance so that its foundations remain solid and are not weakened by time and vicissitudes."

Though rather muted for a first papal Mass abroad, Leo's subsequent travel to Lebanon is expected to produce more fanfare. About one-third of Lebanon's population is Christian, with the majority of those being Maronite Catholic, the largest proportion of any Arab country.

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

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