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Pope Leo XIV, center right, is escorted by Lebanese President Joseph Aoun, right, and First Lady Nehmat Aoun after his arrival at Beirut International Airport in Beirut, Lebanon on Nov. 30, 2025. (AP Photo/Hussein Malla)



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Beirut — November 30, 2025
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Pope Leo XIV arrived in the Christian heart of the Arab world, scarred by conflict, corruption and mass emigration, by calling on its leaders to put aside their factional interests and serve the common good of Lebanon's pluralistic society.

Addressing some 400 government officials at his first public engagement in Beirut, the pope said Lebanon needs "authorities and institutions that recognize the common good as superior to the particular," touting genuine collaboration in a nation where sectarian tensions have stalled efforts to rebuild itself after repeated disaster.

Lingering over Leo's highly anticipated visit to Lebanon is the war in Gaza and Israel's military interventions in the region. The pope flew in from Istanbul a week after Israeli airstrikes hit Beirut's southern suburbs, killing five people, including senior Hezbollah commander Haytham Ali Tabatabai.

On the plane to Beirut, Leo surprised journalists by answering questions about his trip to Turkey. Discussing his meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, he said that they both agreed that the end to the tensions between Israel and the Palestinian people would only be solved by a two-state solution, but that Israel does not currently accept that proposal.

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Upon landing in Beirut, Leo was received by Lebanese President Joseph Aoun; by custom, the office is always held by a Maronite Catholic.

For Lebanon's Christians, the highest proportion of any Arab country, the visit also completes a long-held dream of Pope Francis, who repeatedly spoke of his desire to visit the country.

But a potential visit by the late pope was complicated by the overlapping crises that destabilized Lebanon in the back half of his pontificate: its 2019 economic collapse, the 2020 Beirut port explosion that killed more than 200 people, the COVID-19 pandemic, the government's collapse in 2022 and the Hezbollah-Israel conflict that erupted in 2023 and culminated in Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon in October 2024.

A ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah was struck in November 2024, but Israel continues to carry out regular strikes in southern Lebanon.

How Leo calls for a lasting peace in the region during his visit there while maintaining the Holy See's diplomatic neutrality will be closely watched.

Before Lebanon's political leaders in the Baabda Presidential Palace, he called peace in the country "a work in progress" which requires resilience and a "continuous starting anew."

"Almost everywhere in the world around us, a kind of pessimism and sense of powerlessness seem to have taken hold," the pope said, but despite suffering economic turmoil, the effects of global instability and "the radicalization of identities and conflicts," Lebanon has "always wanted, and known how, to start again."



The convoy escorting Pope Leo XIV drives past war-damaged buildings in Beirut, Lebanon on Nov. 30, 2025, following his arrival. (AP Photo/Mohammed Zaatari)

A wounded Lebanon welcomes Leo with open arms

While Leo's three days in Muslim-majority Turkey unfolded quietly, Lebanon has treated his arrival as a national event. The government declared Dec. 1–2 public holidays, closing government offices and schools; from the moment he walked off the plane, cannons rang out in the distance announcing the pope's arrival.

Hezbollah, the Shia Muslim militant group and political party that exerts immense influence in Lebanon, issued a statement welcoming the pope to Lebanon the day before his arrival and calling for him to reject the "injustice and aggression" inflicted on Lebanon by Israel.

Despite the steady decline of the Christian population in Lebanon, from 62.5% in 1970 to 32% today, largely due to emigration, enthusiasm for the visit has stretched across confessional lines. Banners depicting the pope were hung on buildings

throughout the city ahead of his arrival, and at the airport where the pope arrived an airline hanger was draped with the motto for his visit: "Blessed are the Peacemakers."

Whereas Leo's Mass in Istanbul was celebrated in a modest arena, his closing Mass in Beirut is expected to draw more than 100,000 people.

Meeting a people marked by crisis

At his first event in Lebanon, Leo touched on the many crises facing the country, among them the lack of opportunity that drives out young people in pursuit of a better life.

The Lebanese government estimates that about 15 million Lebanese live abroad, eclipsing its resident population of almost 6 million people.

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>
> — Pope Leo XIV
>
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"Uncertainty, violence, poverty and many other threats are leading to an exodus of young people and families seeking a future elsewhere, even though it is very painful to leave one's homeland," Leo said. "There are times when it is easier to flee, or simply more convenient to move elsewhere."

But the pope said the challenge of "remaining in our homeland and working day by day to develop a civilization of love and peace remains something very valuable."

"It takes real courage and foresight to stay or return to one's own country, and to consider even somewhat difficult situations worthy of love and dedication," he said.

Leo also highlighted the "essential role of women in the arduous and patient endeavour to preserve and build peace."

"Their participation in social and political life, as well as in their own religious communities, represents a factor of true renewal throughout the world, as does the

energy that comes from young people," he said.

The pope's remarks came as Lebanon continues to grapple with the aftermath of the 2020 port explosion, which devastated a largely Christian neighborhood and exposed the depth of the country's entrenched corruption. A judicial investigation into the blast has repeatedly been stalled, and both Leo and Pope Francis publicly called for justice to the families of its victims.

In that context, Leo pushed Lebanon's leadership to move beyond entrenched interests.

"The common good is more than the sum of many interests, for it draws together everyone's goals as closely as possible," he said "directing them in such a way that everyone will have more than if they were to move forward by themselves."



Pope Leo XIV and Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople greet people from a balcony following a Divine Liturgy celebrated in the Patriarchal Cathedral of St. George in Istanbul Nov. 30, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Leo leaves Turkey, but Christian unity remains priority of pontificate

The pursuit of full communion among all Christians "is one of the priorities of the Catholic Church," Leo said after attending an Orthodox Divine Liturgy presided by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew during his final hours in Turkey Nov. 30.

"In particular, it is one of the priorities of my ministry as Bishop of Rome, whose specific role in the universal church is to be at the service of all, building and safeguarding communion and unity," he said.

The pope began the day by visiting the Armenian Apostolic Cathedral in Istanbul, calling for the restoration of full communion between the churches, which, he said, "does not imply absorption or domination" but a full exchange of their gifts.

Leo then traveled to Patriarchal Church of St. George to attend the Divine Liturgy. Afterward, he and Bartholomew offered an ecumenical blessing from the balcony of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's headquarters next door to cap off their three-day tour de fraternity in Turkey.

The visit followed the pair's joint prayer at the site of ancient Nicaea on Nov. 28 to commemorate the council out of which developed the creed professed by most of the world's Christians. The next day, they signed a joint declaration pledging to pursue full communion between their churches and to advance efforts toward establishing a common date for Easter.

In his remarks at St. George's Church, Leo also pointed to three shared challenges facing Catholics and Orthodox today: global conflict, the ecological crisis and the social impact of unregulated technological development, warning that new technologies must "be universally accessible" and not serve only "a privileged few."

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