Opinion

NCR Voices



Pope Leo XIV speaks to Turkey's Catholic bishops, priests, religious, deacons and pastoral workers at the Latin-rite Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Istanbul Nov 29, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Leo XIV's first foreign trip evidenced profound echoes of his predecessor, Pope Francis. Still, we are also starting to see points of difference emerge as well. As Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich said at the press conference the U.S. cardinal-electors held the day after Leo's election: "I think it's important to remember that when we have the appointment of a bishop in the church, we don't talk about a replacement, we talk about a successor. ... That is what we [the cardinal electors] were looking for as well." Leo is not Francis 2.0. Leo is Leo.

Like Francis, Leo went to a country, Turkey, with very few Catholics. Francis, remember, went to Mongolia, which has only a few thousand Catholics. There are not that many more in Turkey and it is wonderful to see the bishop of Rome confirm the faithful in lands where they are so few. Leo met with the elderly as well as the youth, as did his predecessors on their trips. And he met with civic leaders.

Like Francis, Leo championed the cause of Christian unity, looking forward to the great jubilee of 2033 when all Christians will celebrate the 2,000th anniversary of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord. Like all of his recent predecessors, Leo emphasized the special closeness of the church of Rome with the Eastern churches. The scene at the site of the Council of Nicaea, where the pope was joined by almost all the patriarchs of the Eastern churches, was another step toward the restoration of full communion. His obvious and easy rapport with Patriarch Bartholomew brought to mind memories of Pope Paul VI meeting with Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem in 1964.

Unlike Francis, Leo declined to pray while visiting the famous Blue Mosque in Istanbul. I feared that traditionalists who criticized Francis would seize on this point, as they did with Leo's wearing the scarlet mozzetta when he appeared on the loggia of St. Peter's after his election, seeing it a sign of secret traditionalist sympathies. Then people recalled that Pope Benedict XVI had also prayed when he visited the mosque, so that dog didn't hunt.



A child holds a handmade sign reading, “Pope Leo, we love you,” as Pope Leo XIV celebrates Mass with Turkey’s Catholic communities at the Volkswagen Arena in Istanbul Nov. 29, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

One thing Leo said, however, did sound different from what Francis might have said. At the prayer meeting with the local Catholic bishops, clergy, religious and pastoral workers, Leo said:

> Nicaea affirms the divinity of Jesus and his equality with the Father. In Jesus, we find the true face of God and his definitive word about humanity and history. ... But there is also another challenge, which we might call a "new Arianism," present in today's culture and sometimes even among believers. This occurs when Jesus is admired on a merely human level, perhaps even with religious respect, yet not truly regarded as the living and true God among us. His divinity, his lordship over history, is overshadowed, and he is reduced to a great historical figure, a wise teacher, or a prophet who fought for justice — but nothing more. Nicaea

> reminds us that Jesus Christ is not a figure of the past; he is the Son of God present among us, guiding history toward the future promised by God.

We can easily imagine Francis saying something similar, but the warning about a "new Arianism," a new heresy, doesn't sound like Francis, even though I am sure he would agree with the problem Leo identified. Francis seemed more concerned to get people moving. Leo does, too, but he also calls our attention to the need for guardrails.

We saw something similar in Leo's address to the canonists who had come to Rome last month for a course titled: "Ten years after the reform of the canonical matrimonial process. Ecclesiological, juridical and pastoral dimensions."

Leo praised the reforms of the annulment process Francis had enacted. But he also warned that "human judgment on the nullity of marriage cannot however be manipulated by false mercy." I am not sure Francis ever warned about "false mercy." And whereas Francis was ever quick to warn against being overly legalistic, Leo, the canonist, cited the title of the course to see the legal, or juridical, aspect of the annulment process as inextricably intertwined with the pastoral and ecclesiological. "This relationship [of the ecclesiological, juridical and pastoral] is often forgotten, since it tends to conceive of theology, law and pastoral care as separate compartments," Leo said. "Indeed, it is quite common for them to be implicitly contrasted with one another, as if the more theological or pastoral approach were less legal, and vice versa, as if the more legal approach were to the detriment of the other two profiles. The harmony that emerges when the three dimensions are considered as parts of the same reality is thus obscured." Again, the guardrail is pointed out.

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To be clear, Leo is continuing the path charted by Francis, and indeed by the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council. There was also more harmony between Francis and the other postconciliar popes than his critics allowed or his champions acknowledged. But Leo is a different person. He never had the experience of exile that Francis did. Leo, unlike Francis, was trained as a canonist. And, perhaps most importantly, Leo is an Augustinian not a Jesuit. After 11 years of Ignatian insights, which were a great blessing, Leo now brings Augustinian insights into almost every talk. The Catholic

faith is the richer for being reminded of what these two great saints have to teach us!

After Francis died, but before the conclave began, I noted that the situation the cardinals faced was similar to that which confronted the cardinals in the 1963 conclave after the death of Pope John XXIII. Then, the central issue was whether to continue the council, just as in 2025 the central question was whether to continue with the synodal path. In 1963, they selected Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini as Pope Paul VI, someone with more obvious managerial capabilities, who "landed the conciliar plane John XXIII had gotten airborne." What we are seeing now is that Leo is to Francis as Paul was to John: committed to the same program, but more cautious and a better manager, and with a softer personality. A successor, not a replacement.

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