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Pope Leo XIV waves from a Turkish government helicopter when he lands in Iznik, site of the

Pope Leo XIV waves from a Turkish government helicopter when he lands in Iznik, site of the ancient city of Nicaea, Nov. 28, for an ecumenical prayer service commemorating the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Leo XIV's first trip abroad began much like his pontificate: full of intrigue but short on spectacle.

The pope's six-day tour through the Middle East began in Turkey, where the visit's diplomatic and ecumenical stakes were high, yet the atmosphere remained largely subdued.

In Istanbul, several locals learned the pope was in town only because police had cordoned off streets. A visitor wandering the city would have struggled to detect any outward sign that the leader of the world's 1.4 billion Catholics was in town. His

closing Mass in the overwhelming Muslim majority country was attended by some 5,000 people — an incredibly intimate public gathering by papal standards.

Pope Leo XIV presides over Mass at Istanbul's Volkswagen Arena.

Pope Leo XIV presides over Mass at Istanbul's Volkswagen Arena, during his first apostolic journey Nov. 29 in Istanbul, Turkey. About 5,000 people attended the Mass. (OSV News/Reuters/Umit Bektas)

His meeting with Turkey's tiny Catholic community, however, proved emotional. The pope was visibly moved, his eyes welled with tears upon his heartfelt reception. (Though Leo did later tell journalists returning to Rome that they often err in reading his facial expressions.)

But while boarding the plane to Beirut, a narrative seemed to begin taking shape: Leo's pontificate would be oriented toward quiet, meaningful engagement rather than the grand theatrics and sweeping gestures that had been a penchant for some popes.

Yet as journalists typed out reports or shut their eyes for a quick nap on the two-hour flight from Turkey to Lebanon, they were woken to a surprise. Breaking with custom, Leo came to the back of the plane and took two questions from Turkish media midway through his trip. Such papal press conferences had typically been reserved for the popes' return flight to Rome.

Pope Leo XIV listens to a question from a journalist during a news conference aboard his fligh

Pope Leo XIV listens to a question from a journalist during a news conference aboard his flight from Turkey to Lebanon Nov. 30. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Though not a spontaneous act driven by emotion as the press had grown accustomed to with Pope Francis — one can think of his kissing the feet of South Sudan's leaders in a plea for peace — it was a conscious and thought-out decision that nonetheless created a surprise. That may come to be the norm: Leo subverting expectations through intention and not impulse.

Even his decision to travel to Lebanon fit that pattern. The trip was planned well in advance, but the decision to select Lebanon as a destination was in itself surprising

given its security situation. Bombs struck Beirut just a week before Leo's arrival.

In October, when Queen Rania of Jordan asked Leo at the Vatican whether he believed it was safe to go to Lebanon, the pope replied: "Well, we're going."

> Where global leaders measure their strength in the power of their personalities, Leo's restraint leaves room to heed his rhetoric.
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And the Lebanese people responded with an outpouring of emotion that put to rest any perception that this pope lacks star power.

Through pouring rain, thousands lined the road in Beirut from the airport to the presidential palace to catch a glimpse of Leo riding in the popemobile. Billboards and banners with Leo's face were ubiquitous over his three days in the country; Vatican flags fluttered from restaurants and car repair shops alike.

During his meeting with Lebanon's Catholic community, chants of "Long live the pope!" ricocheted through the church. Young people sang and danced for hours before the pope arrived to meet them. At his closing Mass, the crowd cheered adamantly at the pope's mentions of peace, and beforehand the family members of the victims of the 2020 Beirut port blast wept in his arms.

A young man takes a photo of Pope Leo XIV with his phone.

A young man takes a photo of Pope Leo XIV with his phone as the pontiff meets with Lebanese young people at the square in front of the Maronite Patriarchate of Antioch in Bkerké, Lebanon Dec. 1 (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Yet Leo never abandoned the steady, metered cadence characteristic of his public voice. He spoke forcefully, at times his voice boomed, but without the conversational warmth that defined Francis' rapport with crowds. He stuck to his written remarks almost always, clutched them with both hands, and kept his head down for much of the time he spoke.

But the Lebanese audience didn't seem to mind. Leo delivered the words they needed, and, not insignificantly, in perfect English and solid French, both languages

widely understood in Lebanon. The pope's message was well-received by the enthusiastic crowds, not because of his charm but because it was coming from the successor of St. Peter who had traveled to a war-torn region to speak it directly to them.

Leo may not have an expansive personality, but in his own careful way, through words and deeds, he is magnetic.

On his return flight to Rome, he did not give reporters a clear headline like Francis did when returning from his first international trip when he said if a gay person seeks the Lord and has good will, then "who am I to judge?"

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Leo, however, did reveal something about how he views the papacy by telling journalists that before the throngs that shout at him in admiration, "I think to myself, these people are here because they want to see the pope."

That comment reveals a freedom unknown to most figures on the world stage. The papacy is occupied by someone who did not run an electoral campaign and, by all accounts, did not even want the job. Leo said that a year or two ago he had thought about eventually retiring.

Where global leaders measure their strength in the power of their personalities, Leo's restraint leaves room to heed his rhetoric.

Leo's reception in Lebanon showed that the papacy has staying power, and for Leo, that strength lies in the office itself rather than the personality occupying it.

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