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The Spanish bishops conclude their special plenary assembly July 9, 2024. Archbishop Luis Argüello of Valladolid, president of the Spanish bishops' conference, is pictured in the center, with Cardinal José Cobo Cano of Madrid (at left) and Cardinal Juan José Omella of Barcelona (at right). (OSV News/Courtesy of Spanish bishops' conference)



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Pope Leo XIV will soon travel to Spain and to the Canary Islands, a major migrant entry point into Europe, a Spanish cardinal said, shedding light on the pope's travel plans for 2026.

The planned trip would also include stops in Madrid and Barcelona, Cardinal José Cobo Cano of Madrid told reporters Jan. 9 following a meeting with the Vatican's Secretariat of State. No dates have been set.

The trip is "his own personal initiative," Cobo said following the meeting, which focused on initial organizational steps and also included Cardinal Juan José Omella of Barcelona, Bishop José Mazuelos of the Canary Islands, and the president and secretary general of the Spanish bishops' conference.

A central feature of the trip, Cobo said, would be a visit to the Canary Islands, an Atlantic archipelago off the coast of Morocco that has become the destination for one of the deadliest migration routes in Europe.

More than 1,900 people are estimated to have died attempting to reach the Canary Islands from the shores of Africa in 2025.

"I believe that now is a very important moment to make the voice of migration heard throughout Spain and at all the major points of entry," Cobo said.

According to Spanish government data, 17,788 migrants reached the Canary Islands through irregular routes in 2025. That figure follows 39,910 arrivals in 2023 and 46,843 in 2024, after Spain and the European Union reached agreements with Morocco, Mauritania, and Senegal to patrol departure routes toward the islands.

Pope Francis had previously expressed a desire to visit the Canary Islands as a sign of closeness to migrants, though the trip never materialized.

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The Spain visit would mark the first papal trip to the country since Pope Benedict XVI traveled to Madrid for World Youth Day in 2011. It would also represent a shift from the travel pattern of Francis' pontificate, during which the pope largely bypassed major European nations in favor of smaller ones.

While the final agenda remains undecided, Cobo said another "main point" of the visit would likely be Barcelona's Basilica of the Sagrada Familia, which is expected to be completed in 2026, 144 years after construction began.

June 2026 will also mark the 100th anniversary of the death of Antoni Gaudí, the basilica's architect, who is currently on the path to becoming declared a saint.

"Spain has long been in need and has continually asked for the pope to come," Cobo said. "I believe that right now, opening this door is a source of hope."

Leo's travel calendar had until now been largely constrained by the 2025 Jubilee of Hope, which he formally closed earlier this week (Jan. 6). Although he made his first international trip as pope to Turkey and Lebanon, the conclusion of the Holy Year frees him to plan more extensive travel.

The visit to the Canary Islands would echo Francis' first trip outside of Rome in 2013 to Lampedusa, the Italian island and migrant entry point, which set the tone for his relentless advocacy on behalf of the world's migrants throughout his 12-year pontificate.

On his return flight to Rome from Lebanon, Leo also spoke of his desire to visit the sites linked to St. Augustine of Hippo in Algeria, the spiritual inspiration of the Augustinian religious order to which he belongs. He has also said he hopes to travel to Argentina and Uruguay, countries not visited by Francis, as well as Peru, where he spent more than two decades as a missionary priest and bishop.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** and **Pope Leo in Spain** feature series.