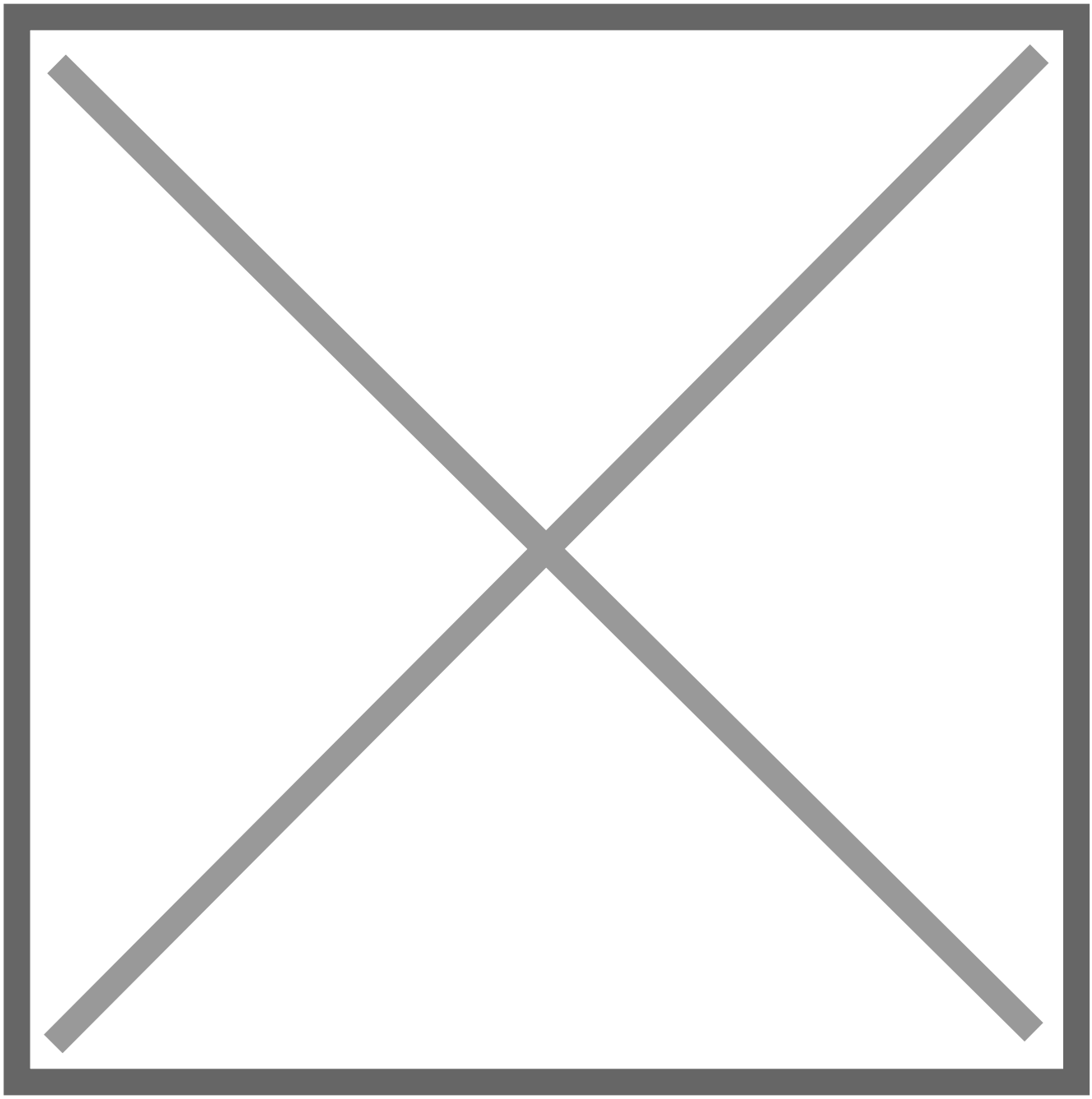
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Pope Leo XIV, seen with Peruvian bishops Jan. 30, 2026, holds an image they presented to him that shows Jesus Christ at the center, with St. Rose of Lima, upper left, and other Church figures. The bishops also gave him a mosaic of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which will be blessed and placed in the Vatican Gardens on Jan. 31, Vatican News reported. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Ad limina visits by bishops tend to make headlines in local churches when the bishops involved are in some kind of trouble.

This time, however, the Peruvian bishops' visit to the tomb of the apostles made global news for a different reason: an unusual guest at their lunch and fraternal affection from the pope who is claimed by Peruvian faithful as their own.

"Peru holds a special place in my heart," the pontiff told the bishops during their Jan. 30 audience in the Vatican.

Before addressing them during the formal audience meeting, Pope Leo XIV felt at home when he visited the Peruvian prelates during a "fraternal lunch" Jan. 29 — fraternal, as he was a longtime member of the country's bishops' conference.

"The bishops of Peru received a pleasant and unexpected surprise today: a visit from Pope Leo XIV during a fraternal luncheon," the conference said in a post on X Jan. 29.

"This gesture of closeness and communion strengthens the pastoral mission of the Church in Peru," the post said.

An "ad limina apostolorum" — Latin for "to the threshold of the apostles," is a mandatory, periodic visit made by Catholic diocesan bishops to Rome to pray at the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul, and report on the state of their dioceses to the pope. The visits usually occur every five years.

"We are here to pray for peace and the future of Peru, so that this visit may strengthen us all and encourage us in faith to serve better," said Bishop Carlos García Camader of Lurín, president of the Peruvian bishops' conference, according to Vatican News.

"We pray that our future leaders will be good men and women who serve the nation, seek the common good, and above all, strive to unite and add together, not to subtract or divide," he added.

Leo started his Jan. 30 audience with members of the conference with a greeting to his beloved Peruvians: "I ask you to remind my dear children of Peru that the Pope holds them in his heart and remembers them with affection, especially in his prayers."

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Posing a question on how can the Peruvian Church respond "to the many challenges it faces today in its evangelizing mission," the pope said the answer lays "in many writings of the first missionaries in America: to live ad instar Apostolorum, that is, in the manner of the Apostles, with simplicity, courage, and total availability to let ourselves be guided by the Lord."

And in that, the pope said, the primary task is "to safeguard and promote unity and communion."

"The Apostles, scattered throughout the world, remained united in one mind and one mission. Today too, the credibility of our message depends on a real and heartfelt communion among pastors, and between them and the People of God, overcoming divisions, self-importance, and every form of isolation," the pope told his confreres, adding that "At the same time, today's challenges demand a renewed fidelity to the Gospel, which must be proclaimed in its entirety."

Citing "total dedication to the ministry entrusted to us," the bishops "are called to go out to meet" those "entrusted to us" and "draw near" to them.

While ad limina visits include Masses in papal basilicas, praying at the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul, papal audience and visits to various dicasteries, as well as a meeting with the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, usually they don't involve cakes for the pope. This time, it was different.

Visibly joyful Leo shared a white cake prepared for him by his brothers, sharing laughs and personal greetings.

Peru is his second homeland and a large part of the pontiff's life. First, he spent over a decade working in the country as an Augustinian missionary. He came back to Peru after serving as prior provincial and then prior general of his order in Chicago between 1999-2013, to become bishop of Chiclayo in 2015 — from where he moved to Rome where he started leading the Dicastery for Bishops in 2023.

During his first address as pontiff, Leo — formerly Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost — paused to greet "my dear Diocese of Chiclayo, Peru, where a faithful people have accompanied their bishop, shared their faith and has given so much, so much to continue to be a faithful Church of Jesus Christ."

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Then-Bishop Prevost shepherded the Diocese of Chiclayo through some of its most difficult times. Most notably, he was at the forefront of the church's response to the catastrophic 2017 El Niño Costero, which brought record flooding, destroyed homes and cut off entire communities from vital resources.

His legacy in Lambayeque, the region encompassing Chiclayo, was further sealed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Had he stayed in his native country, I think his sense of the church would've been very different," Aldo Llanos, a professor of philosophy and anthropology in the University of Piura, told OSV News upon Prevost's election to papacy. "But he came to Peru in 1985 — a country in crisis — and was changed by it. That experience left a mark."

"He has left an indelible mark on the hearts of Chiclayo," Janinna Sesa Córdova, who led Caritas Chiclayo from 2014 to 2024, told OSV News in May.

"Because he was always there — in the floods, the pandemic, the celebrations, and the sorrows. A bishop of the people. A true shepherd."

In his message to the bishops of Peru Jan. 30, Leo echoed the sentiments felt by those that worked with him.

"Peru holds a special place in my heart," he said. "There I shared with you joys and hardships, learned the simple faith of its people, and experienced the strength of a Church that knows how to wait even in the midst of trials."

During their ad limina visit, Peruvian bishops' presented the pope with a mosaic of the Blessed Virgin Mary and an image of St. Rose of Lima, which was to be blessed and placed in the Vatican Gardens Jan. 31, Vatican News reported.

The last two ad limina visits by the bishops from Peru took place in May 2017, with Pope Francis, and in May 2009, with Pope Benedict XVI.