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Analysis



Pope Leo XIV prepares to leave St. Paul Outside the Walls Basilica in Rome, Jan. 25, 2026, after leading a vesper service on the Feast of the Conversion of Paul the Apostle. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

Claire Giangravé

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Though no official date has been made public by the Holy See, Pope Leo XIV has expressed his desire to visit Algeria this year, a trip that would make him the first pontiff to travel to the north African country.

Some Vatican experts believe the visit might take place in the spring, after the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which runs from mid-February to mid-March. That timing would coincide with the 30th anniversary of the martyrdom of seven Trappist monks in Tibhirine, in the south of Algeria, on May 21. (The story of the seven was depicted in the 2010 film "Of Gods and Men.")

In July, Leo met with the president of Algeria, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, at the Vatican, a meeting seen by Vatican watchers as potentially laying the groundwork for a formal invitation.

"Personally, I hope to go to Algeria to visit the places of St. Augustine's life," the pope said in December, referring to the fourth-century church father who was bishop of Hippo, in modern-day Algeria. Leo is a member and former leader of the Augustinian order, which traces its roots to Augustine's teachings.

In 2001, Algeria hosted a major international conference titled "St. Augustine: Africanity and Universality," which aimed at reframing the bishop of Hippo as an African intellectual figure. After the conference, said François Vayne, an Algerian journalist of French origins who has reported on Algerian Christians, "St. Augustine began to be seen as part of Algeria's cultural heritage — a great philosopher — not simply as a Christian figure."

Speaking at a journalism event organized by the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome on Tuesday (Jan. 27), Vayne said a papal visit to Algeria could also help to mend the wounds of colonialism in the country and beyond.

"Perhaps he could ask forgiveness for the links between the church and colonization," he said, adding, "This would be very strong, because the church in Algeria was long perceived as a remnant of French colonization."

A papal visit to Algeria would likely include a stop at Annaba, the city that stands on the site Hippo, and where a basilica dedicated to Augustine stands today. Today, the majority of the basilica's visitors are Muslim, and in his December comments Leo said a visit to Algeria would offer an opportunity to strengthen relations with the Muslim world.

It would also encourage the country's small Christian population. According to the U.S. State Department's 2023 report on international religious freedom, fewer than 1% of Algeria's 46 million residents identify as Christian. Catholics number roughly 8,000, according to church estimates, most of them migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. The clergy come from Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Kenya and Uganda.

"The church in Algeria is small, joyful, fraternal, but fragile — and it is precisely this fragility that gives it credibility," Vayne said.

In 2006, the Algerian government approved an ordinance limiting places of worship for non-Muslims and making proselytism illegal.

"The Catholic Church respects this law and accepts being a guest church in a country where Islam is the religion of the state," Vayne said. "Our mission is not to weaken the faith of Muslims, but to help Islam show itself as a religion of peace, through the practical works of peace."

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Leo faced a similar balancing act during his November visit to Turkey, encouraging the Catholic community without challenging the state religion. He would encounter comparable dynamics in Algeria, said Livia Passalacqua, an expert on Algeria with a doctorate in missiology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

"This is a church that lives as a guest in the house of the other," she said. "It is not about proclaiming a truth against the other, but about entering into relationship, listening to one another and walking forward together."

That approach draws not only on Augustine's thought but on the spirituality of St. Charles de Foucauld, a 19th-century French aristocrat-turned-soldier who converted to Catholicism and became a hermit priest among the Tuareg Muslims in the Algerian Sahara. He embraced an "apostolate of goodness" focused on attracting people to the Catholic faith not through proselytism, but through acts of goodness and personal relationships. Foucauld was made a saint in 2022 by Pope Francis.

This year marks the 800th anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi, who, among other things, is known for attempting to bridge the divide between Catholics and Muslims. Speakers at Tuesday's event agreed that the anniversary will offer an opportunity to promote interreligious dialogue. Some noted that Notre-Dame d'Afrique, a massive basilica overlooking Algiers, would be an ideal place to advance that message. The basilica is dedicated to the Virgin Mary but is revered by many local Muslims.

Dialogue between the two faiths has not always been easy. In the brutal civil war that enveloped the country between 1994 and 1996, almost 150,000 people were killed, including 19 Catholic missionaries and clergy who lost their lives after refusing to leave the country amid the growing violence. Known as the martyrs of Algeria, the 19 were beatified in December 2018 in Oran.

Among them was Bishop Pierre Claverie of Oran, who was killed in a bomb attack along with his Muslim driver in 1996. "The blood of Christians and Muslims was mixed, and this created a new unity between the church and the Algerian people," said Vayne, who is the author of "Tibhirine Lives: The Legacy of the Martyred Monks of Algeria."

During the gathering of cardinals at the Vatican in January, the archbishop of Algiers, Cardinal Jean-Paul Vesco, voiced his enthusiasm regarding a rumored papal visit to his country in an interview with EWTN. "It would be a dream for me if he decided to come!" he said.

This story appears in the **Leo XIV in North and Central Africa** feature series. View the full series.