Pope Leo XIV waved to pilgrims holding a flag of the United States as he arrives in St. Peter's

Pope Leo XIV waved to pilgrims holding a flag of the United States as he arrives in St. Peter's Square on the popemobile for his general audience at the Vatican June 18, 2025. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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The first American to lead the global Catholic Church will not travel to the United States in 2026, during the first year of his pontificate and the country's semiquincentennial.

Pope Leo XIV "will not go to the United States in 2026," the Holy See Press Office said Feb. 8 in response to questions about the pope's travel plans.

The clarification follows weeks of speculation that Leo might make a high-profile visit to the United States later this year, possibly tied to the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September.

Some observers had floated the possibility that a U.S. stop could be paired with a visit to Mexico, where the pope has shown interest in visiting soon to entrust his pontificate to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Marian devotion venerated at a shrine in Mexico City and revered across Latin America.

A papal trip to the United States for the Chicago-born pontiff had been widely anticipated, but a number of factors may have complicated the prospect of such a visit so early in his pontificate.

For one, Leo has appeared cautious about leaning into the label of an "American pope." While he has said in a past interview, "I very much feel that I'm an American," his early public gestures have emphasized a broader, global identity. During his first public appearance following his election, the pope notably spoke in Italian and Spanish, but not in his native English. A papal trip during the country's semiquincentennial, however, would inevitably coincide with heightened expressions of national pride.

The Vatican also traditionally avoids scheduling papal visits close to elections. While Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States in April 2008, seven months before that year's presidential election, a trip organized for Leo later in 2026 would place his travel uncomfortably close to the U.S. midterm elections in November.

And practically, Cardinal Christoph Pierre, papal nuncio to the United States, just celebrated his 80th birthday, placing him long past the resignation age of 75. His successor as the Vatican's representative to the United States is expected to be named soon, and to organize such a high-stakes papal trip would be a tall order for a nunciature in the midst of a transition.

Pope Leo XIV arrives by plane from Ankara in Istanbul, Turkey, Nov. 27, 2025, at the beginnin

Pope Leo XIV arrives by plane from Ankara in Istanbul, Turkey, Nov. 27, 2025, at the beginning of his first international papal trip. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

Leo's travel plans begin to take shape

The Vatican is expected to soon announce the pope's trip to Africa expected after Easter, which should include Algeria, Angola and other not-yet-announced African countries.

Several Spanish bishops told the media that Leo intends to visit Spain this year, potentially in June, including a stop at the Canary Islands, one of Europe's largest migrant hotspots.

Peru's bishops said after meeting with the pope that a papal visit is expected in their country sometime between November and December. Leo spent more than two decades as a missionary priest and bishop in various regions of northern Peru.

With only one papal trip under his belt so far to Turkey and Lebanon, Leo's travel schedule has been light since he inherited a jam-packed schedule for the Holy Year 2025 which saw regular events hosted in Rome.

Early papal returns to a pope's homeland are not without precedent.

St. John Paul II drew massive crowds in his native Poland in June 1979 some eight months after his election to the papacy. Pope Benedict XVI's first trip as pope was to his native Germany to celebrate World Youth Day 2005 in Cologne; he visited his native Bavaria in southern Germany just over a year later.

Pope Francis, by contrast, never returned to his native Argentina following his election in 2013, despite frequently expressing his desire to do so.

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