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Michigan Wolverines guard Charles Matthews tries to defend a shot from Villanova Wildcats guard Donte DiVincenzo in the 2018 NCAA men's basketball championship in San Antonio. Villanova defeated Michigan, winning its second championship in three years. Villanova, Pope Leo XIV's alma mater, and the University of Notre Dame are finalizing an agreement to open the men's and women's seasons Nov. 1 in Rome. (OSV News/USA TODAY Sports via Reuters/Robert Deutsch)



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Vatican City — February 11, 2026
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Pope Leo XIV's alma mater, Villanova University, is planning to tip off its 2026–27 basketball season in Rome against the University of Notre Dame, and organizers are hoping the Wildcats' most famous alumnus might be in the stands.

The two storied U.S. Catholic universities and basketball powerhouses are finalizing an agreement to open the men's and women's seasons with a Nov. 1 doubleheader in the Eternal City, according to CBS Sports.

The games are expected to be played at Rome's Palazzetto dello Sport, which seats roughly 3,500 for basketball.

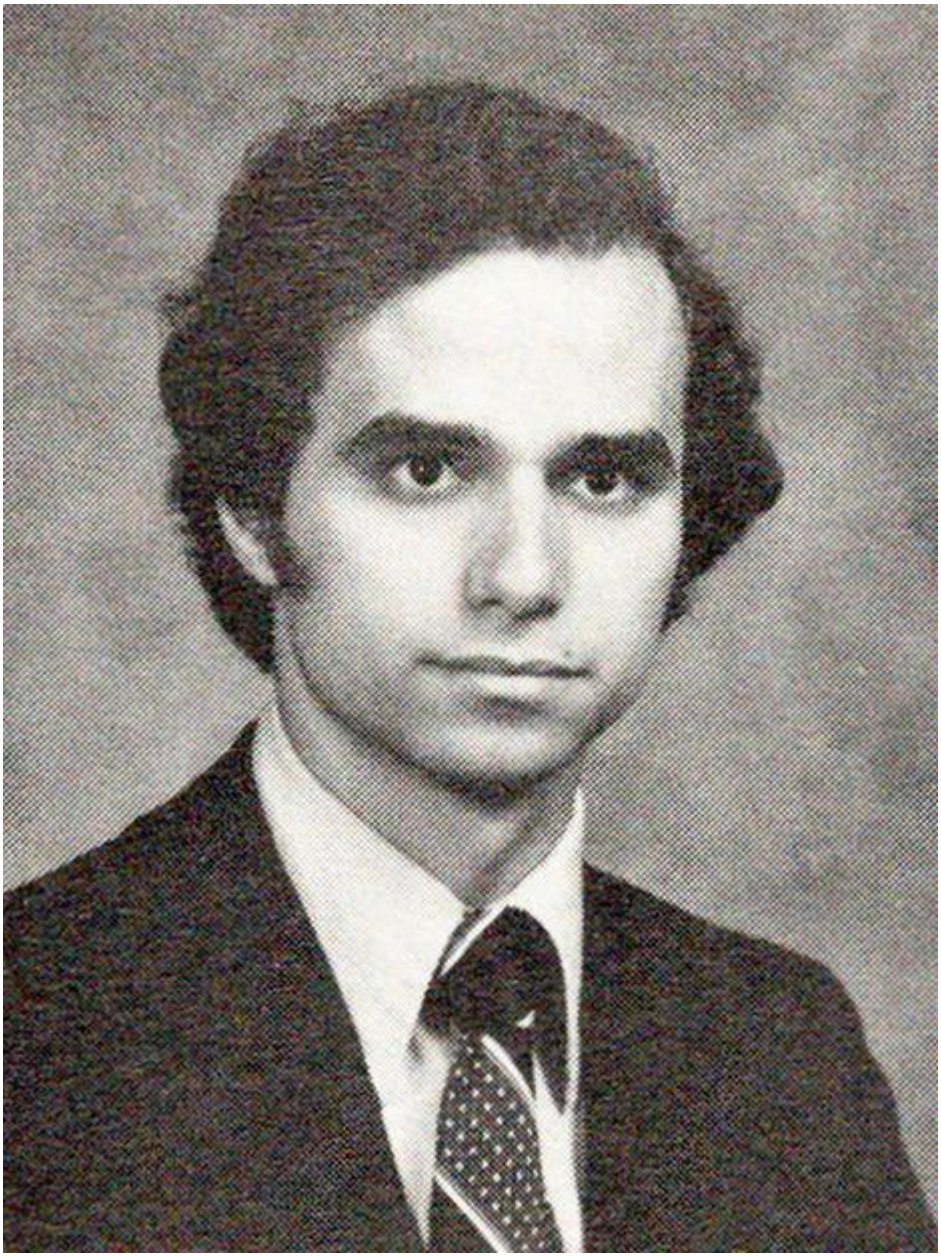
Sources familiar with the matter told the National Catholic Reporter that the pope has been invited to attend, though it remains unclear whether he will do so.




A pillar is visible in front of St. Thomas of Villanova Church on the campus of Villanova University near Philadelphia March 11, 2021. (OSV News/CNS file/Chaz Muth)

CBS Sports reported that the NCAA granted the schools a waiver to play Nov. 1, one day before the official start of the college basketball season, to allow for the ambitious proposal.

Villanova's men's program has won three national championships, while Notre Dame's women's team has claimed two.



Robert F. Prevost, the future Pope Leo XIV, during his senior year at Villanova University, is pictured in this undated photo. (OSV News/Courtesy of Villanova University)

Robert Prevost, the future pope, graduated from Villanova in 1977 with a Bachelor of Science in mathematics after studying at an Augustinian minor seminary in Holland,* Michigan. The Philadelphia-area school is one of two Augustinian universities in the United States in addition to Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts.

Leo, the first U.S. pope and first Augustinian to lead the church, is an avid sports fan and athlete who regularly plays tennis. Raised in a south suburb of Chicago, he

famously roots for the Chicago White Sox baseball team.

Though unknown whether he regularly attended basketball games as an undergraduate student, the pope's affinity for Villanova basketball has come to light since his election to the papacy.



Pope Leo XIV holds the St. Augustine Medal, which was presented to him by Augustinian Fr. Robert P. Hagan, prior of the order's U.S. Province of St. Thomas of Villanova, during a meeting July 18, 2025, at Villa Barberini in Castel Gandolfo, Italy. The pope recorded a video message of thanks, which was played in Philadelphia Aug. 28, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Augustinian Fr. Rob Hagan, chaplain of the Villanova men's basketball team, told The Philadelphia Inquirer that the future pope would ask him about the team's progress when the two would cross paths.

And when the Wildcats made deep runs in the NCAA tournament in 2016 and 2018, Prevost, at the time a bishop in Chiclayo, Peru, joined group chats of other Villanova

alumni to follow the action, Hagan said.

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Although Leo grew up in the American Midwest closer to Notre Dame, there is no indication that he rooted for the Fighting Irish.

Though the pope has made clear who he will be rooting for come Nov. 1.

In separate private audiences, Leo received hats of both universities; while he held the Notre Dame hat in his hands and smiled for photos, he took off his white zucchetto when given a Villanova cap and popped it on his head to great applause.

*The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.*

**This story has been updated to correct that Prevost studied in Holland, Michigan.*