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Pope Leo XIV greets visitors and pilgrims from the popemobile while riding around St. Peter’s

Pope Leo XIV greets visitors and pilgrims from the popemobile while riding around St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican before his weekly general audience March 18, 2026. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



by Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js

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States have a moral obligation to develop universal health care systems, Pope Leo XIV said, stating that "health cannot be a luxury for the few."

"On the contrary, it is an essential condition for social peace," he said March 18 at a conference on health care inequality in Europe organized by the European bishops' council, Italian bishops' conference and the World Health Organization.

"Universal health coverage is not merely a technical goal to be achieved; it is primarily a moral imperative for societies that wish to call themselves just," the pope said. "Healthcare must be accessible to the most vulnerable, then, not only because their dignity requires it but also to prevent injustice from becoming a cause of

conflict."

> 'Health cannot be a luxury for the few.'
> —Pope Leo XIV
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Leo pointed to widening inequalities in health care, noting that "fewer people are able to access the services available," and stressed the urgency of adapting health systems to better address mental health, "particularly that of young people, because invisible psychological wounds are no less severe than those that are visible."

Reflecting on his predecessor's 2020 encyclical on human fraternity, Fratelli Tutti, the pope said that "distance, distraction and desensitization to the sight of violence and the suffering of others lead us toward indifference."

"Yet all men and women, especially Christians, are called to fix their gaze on those who suffer: on the pain of the lonely, on those who for various reasons are marginalized and considered 'outcasts,' " he said. "For without them, we cannot build just societies founded on the human person."

Leo said the church in Europe "can still play a decisive role today in combating inequalities in healthcare, particularly in support of the most vulnerable populations," by engaging in charity and advancing human fraternity.

The conference coincided with the presentation of a second World Health Organization report on health equity in Europe. Topics on the conference's agenda include the relationship between loneliness and health, inequality in mental health care and the role of the church in preventing health poverty.

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