Opinion
Guest Voices



A rainbow hangs above mountains in the distance as people shop at a food market in Lubango, Angola, March 21, 2025. (Dreamstime/Joyfull)



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April 7, 2026

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When Pope Leo XIV's plane touches down in Algiers next week, he will embark upon the third pastoral journey of his papacy. Coming on the heels of visits to Turkey and Lebanon and to Monaco, the pontiff's 10-day itinerary through Algeria, Cameroon, Angola and Equatorial Guinea is more than a diplomatic tour. It is a pilgrimage and a statement of priority.

Leo served as prior general of the Augustinians for more than a decade before his election, and this pilgrimage brings him to the birthplace of his spiritual identity: the homeland of St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine is often quoted for his observation, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." This insight is often read by many spiritual seekers as a private longing for personal peace. But Leo will find that in the context of modern Africa, the "restless heart" is not a private prayer — it is a public, communal energy. It is the heartbeat of a continent that for the Catholic Church has become the laboratory of hope: a theological and pastoral concept describing Catholic communities that embody synodality, hope and social transformation.

Consequently, Leo is not traveling to Africa to *bring* hope to the continent; he is traveling there to *find* hope, in all its painful complexity.

Attitudes toward Africa tend to oscillate between two extremes: on the one hand a dismissive and pessimistic view of Africa as a hopeless continent plagued by war, violence and poverty, and on the other, a romantic projection of Africa as an exotic source of future hope. The reality is far more complex. Africa is a continent of contradictions: youthful energy and high unemployment; ecological richness and environmental degradation; deep faith and political instability.

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Algeria: A birthplace and a site for dialogue

In Algeria, the pope's Augustinian roots meet the reality of a Muslim-majority country. Here, the "restless heart" manifests as the necessity of interfaith dialogue. Having previously visited the country as prior general, Leo knows that faith in Africa is not lived in private. It is a public reality where Catholicism, Islam and Indigenous traditions navigate the social and political landscape together.

In Algiers, the pope will see that the future of the church depends on its ability to live as a creative minority, finding common ground in the pursuit of peace. This first stop on Leo's journey highlights one complex "experiment" in the laboratory of hope: learning how to be a church through interfaith engagement.

Cameroon: Lament at a colonial intersection

From the spiritual history of Algeria, the pilgrimage moves to the "lament" of Cameroon. Here, the restlessness is painful. Cameroon currently stands at a grueling intersection of colonial legacies. It is a country divided between its Anglophone and Francophone regions, a linguistic and cultural fracture left behind by British and French rule that has devolved into a 10-year civil war.

The church in Cameroon must practice what I have called "hope born from lament." In a country where 93-year-old President Paul Biya, a former seminarian, presides over a stalled political transition, hope is not sunny optimism. It is the "restless" refusal to let violence have the last word.



Riot police walk on a street as a fire burns during clashes with supporters of Cameroon opposition leader Issa Tchiroma Bakary in Garoua, Cameroon, Oct. 31,

2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Desire Danga Essigue)

As the pope visits both Anglophone and Francophone areas, he will signal that the church is likely the only institution capable of bridging these colonial divides. In Cameroon, "resting in God" means refusing to accept the inevitability of conflict. It is a social act of resilience.

Angola: Paradox of plenty and poverty

As Leo journeys to Angola, he will experience a country that embodies the "paradox of plenty." A former Portuguese colony, Angola is rich in oil and natural resources, yet it remains burdened by poverty and the lingering scars of a decades-long civil war. Here, the "restless heart" is a cry for economic justice.

How can a country be so wealthy and its people so poor? This is not just an economic question; it is a theological one. In Angola, where 70% of the population is Catholic, the church acts as the conscience of the state. It navigates the tension between resource wealth and human dignity. This reflects a trend across the continent, from Nigeria to the Congo: The discovery of oil often leads to the displacement of the poor and the degradation of the land.

In Angola, the pope will witness a church integrating ecology, economics and spirituality, an "integral ecology" that recognizes the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor as one. The restlessness here is a holy dissatisfaction with an economy of exclusion.

Equatorial Guinea: The final stop

Equatorial Guinea, the final stop on the pope's pastoral journey, is a country whose colonial legacy is evident through its Spanish heritage. With a population that is 70% Catholic, Equatorial Guinea radiates many of the same contradictions that characterize much of Africa: It is rich in oil resources, yet the majority of the population lives in poverty under an authoritarian leadership with a poor human rights record.



Choir members pictured in a file photo pray during Mass at the main cathedral in the port city of Bata, Equatorial Guinea. (OSV News/Reuters/Amr Abdallah Dalsh)

Together, these four countries, all "laboratories" of the church's lived experience, illuminate important dynamics and challenges across the continent.

While many Catholics in the U.S. and Europe have become complacent about their role in the church, Africa is experiencing exponential growth and vitality that can no longer be overlooked. Its restlessness is the engine of the global church's future. It is a spirit that refuses to separate the Gospel from the struggle to uphold human dignity, peace and justice.

Leo is showing a significant commitment by staying in Africa for 10 days. He is signaling that the church must look to Africa for guidance on its future direction. He is coming not to bring hope to Africa, but to connect to the hope of Africa. He arrives as a fellow pilgrim, seeking the sources of hope that exist among the African people despite the weight of their challenging history.

Many have noted that the future of the church lies in Africa. That future however, is not a geographical location; it is a spirit. It is a restless spirit that laments brokenness and despair but "rests" and finds hope in the active, communal work of building God's kingdom. It is the spirit of hope born of lament.

As this Augustinian pope walks on the soil of his spiritual forefather, may he find in the restless heart of Africa the hope that the global church needs to truly be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

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