Vatican
Analysis



Pope Leo XIV stands with his crosier as he celebrates Mass at the Basilica of St. Augustine in Annaba, Algeria, April 14, 2026. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Simone Risoluti)



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President Donald Trump's virtual tirade against Pope Leo XIV loomed large as the pontiff embarked on his 11-day tour of Africa.

And when, some 30,000 feet over the Mediterranean Sea, reporters pressed the pope about the attack, he answered calmly in his typically metered tone that he has "no fear of the Trump administration" and that "someone has to stand up and say there's a better way" on the war in Iran.

Those comments have positioned the first U.S.-born pope as an unlikely counterweight to the American president on the global stage, whether he intends to play that role or not.

In response, Vice President JD Vance said the Vatican should "stick to matters of morality," while House Speaker Mike Johnson has argued that the pope warranted the criticism by the president for wading "into political waters."

By Leo's own telling, however, he does not see his role as one of a "politician."

"To put my message on the same plane as what the president has attempted to do here, I think is not understanding what the message of the Gospel is," he said en route to Algeria on April 13.

Cardinal Cristóbal López Romero of Rabat, Morocco, said Leo's decision to travel to Africa was itself a signal "to say that he is not a politician, [but] he is bringing the message of the Gospel."

The pope's four-nation tour of Africa, to countries each considered to be authoritarian, underscores that claim.

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So far in Algeria and Cameroon, Leo has leaned into the moral vocabulary that has been rebuked by members of the Trump administration and that, in practice, lands squarely on political realities.

"Authorities are called not to dominate, but to serve the people and foster their development," he told government officials in Algeria, where power remains concentrated in the hands of the military-backed ruling elite.

He called on the government "to promote a vibrant, dynamic and free civil society, in which young people in particular are recognized as capable of helping to broaden the horizon of hope for all," a line echoing the 2019 protest movements throughout the country largely sparked by young people. The protests resulted in the resignation of Algeria's then-President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Two days later in Yaoundé, the pope stood alongside the 93-year-old Cameroonian President Paul Biya, who has had a chokehold on power in the Central African nation since taking office in 1982, and delivered a similarly pointed message.

Cameroon, considered one of the most corrupt countries in the world, must break free from the "chains of corruption which disfigure authority and strip it of its credibility," Leo said. He called for women's voices to "be fully recognized in decision-making processes" and that "hearts must be set free from an idolatrous thirst for profit."

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In the coming days, the pope is expected to address the inequality in Angola that has kept more than 30% of the population in poverty despite the country's vast rare mineral and oil reserves. On the last leg of his trip, in Equatorial Guinea, he will confront President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who has been in power since 1979 and is accused of enacting fierce political repression and corruption.

Yet Leo said on the flight to Algeria that his messages "are not meant as attacks on anyone."

Whereas the pope's calls for peace have cast him as a political enemy in Washington, in Africa Leo has shared a stage with authoritarian leaders and, at their own invitation, admonished aspects of their governance.

It is precisely because the pope is not a politician that he can operate in such a way. A politician's visit to a country may be read as an endorsement of its policies, but Leo's trips show that he sees himself as a messenger of peace seeking to preach Gospel values to entire nations, including their civil authorities.

That mindset appears not to have computed for several U.S. political leaders eager to cast the pope's comments into an us-vs.-them political framing.

For his part, Leo has shown that he has no interest in launching political attacks. Instead, as he told reporters while departing for his trip, he is looking to preach "the message of the church, my message, the message of the Gospel: Blessed are the peacemakers."

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