News



A man walks past a mural of Pope Leo XIV in Luanda, South Africa, April 16, 2026. Leo is expected to pray the rosary April 19 at the Church of Our Lady of Muxima in Angola as part of his11-day Africa tour. (AP/Themba Hadebe)

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The Church of Our Lady of Muxima was built by Portuguese colonizers in Angola at the end of the 16th century as part of a fortress complex and became a hub in the slave trade. It remains a reminder of the inextricable link hundreds of years ago between Catholicism and the exploitation of the African continent.

Pope Leo XIV's planned visit to the church in the town of Muxima on April 19 as part of his Africa tour is in recognition of it becoming a popular Catholic shrine after believers reported an appearance by the Virgin Mary around 1833.

But before that, the white-walled church on the edge of the Kwanza River was a point where enslaved Africans were gathered to be baptized by Portuguese priests before being forced to walk the last 145 kilometers (90 miles) to Angola's main port of Luanda to be put on ships to the Americas.

The Portuguese colonizers were emboldened by 15th-century directives from the Vatican that authorized them to enslave non-Christians.

Angola was at the center of the slave trade

Ultimately, more than 5 million people left from Angola on the trans-Atlantic slave route, more than any other country and nearly half of the roughly 12.5 million African slaves sent across the ocean.

It's unclear if Leo will address slavery on his Africa trip, as St. John Paul II did on papal visits to Cameroon in 1985 and Senegal in 1992. Joe Biden visited Angola in the last months of his presidency in 2024 and spoke about slavery as America's "original sin."

But some African Catholics see a highly symbolic moment when the head of the Catholic Church — who is himself an American — recites the rosary on the riverside esplanade next to the fortress and the centuries-old chapel in Muxima, as Leo plans to do.

"For me, the pope going there to pray the Rosary ... he will give that place a new significance," said Fr. Celestino Epalanga, a priest with the Catholic bishops' conference of Angola. "We have to give it a new sense. To make this place sacred instead of being a place of evil."

The pope's complex heritage

The moment might resonate even more after revelations around Leo's own heritage.

Last year, a genealogist in the U.S. discovered that the first American pope — whose name is Robert Prevost — has Creole heritage and his maternal great-grandparents were described as people of color in Louisiana census records. The research uncovered that Leo had Black and white ancestors who included both enslaved people and slave owners.

Related: Pope Leo XIV's Creole heritage highlights complex history of racism and the church in America

Some of the first slaves to arrive in Louisiana were sent from Angola, according to historians.

Leo has not spoken publicly about his heritage. But Mariana Candido, a professor of history at Emory University in Atlanta, said she sees a fascinating complexity in how a place linked to such an immoral act like Muxima became a pilgrimage site for Angolans and how Leo might be cognizant of that when he goes there to reach out to a new generation of African Catholics.

"I can see how this is a way of connecting to Catholics in Angola, and making the Church more in sync with how people are practicing Catholicism in Angola and in African countries," she said.

Candido said Leo is well-placed to do that, given his history serving people in his hometown of Chicago, with its large African American population.



People walk by the Church of Our Lady of Muxima in Muxima, Angola, April 11, 2026. Pope Leo XIV is expected to visit the church, a hub of the Portuguese slave trade, during his 11-day pastoral visit to Africa. (AP)

Fr. Stan Chu Ilo, a Nigerian priest and professor at DePaul University in Chicago, said he has seen evidence that the pontiff is developing connections to Africa by elevating African figures in the church, including with the recent promotion of Msgr. Anthony Ekpo of Nigeria to a high-ranking position at the Vatican.

"This pope is actively cultivating African presence within the church and trying to, I think, heal this policy or program of seeing Africa as just making up the numbers," said Chu Ilo.

Leo said at the start of his trip that he had decided in May 2025, soon after his election, that Africa would be his first trip as pope. Other trips intervened in the meantime, but he said this particular visit to Africa was "very special for several reasons."

A church that confronts modern-day problems

Angola bears especially deep scars from slavery and colonialism. It was a Portuguese colony until 1975. Immediately after independence, it slipped into a bloody civil war that pitted Angolans newly freed from colonialism against each other. The conflict lasted on and off for 27 years and killed more than half a million people.

African priests Epalanga and Chu Ilo both recognize colonialism's impact but said it's also important that Leo invigorates a Catholic Church in Angola — originally brought by colonial oppressors — to be an agent for good confronting modern-day problems.



Workers walk by the 16th-century fortress in Muxima, Angola, Saturday, April 11, 2026. The church was part of a fortress complex that became a central hub in the Portuguese slave trade. (AP)

The Vatican has said that some of the themes Leo will raise in Africa are the exploitation of natural and human resources, corruption and authoritarian regimes.

That resonates with Olivio Nkilumbo, an opposition lawmaker in Angola's Parliament who said the country is still not a democracy that delivers for its 37 million people more than a half-century after independence. Nkilumbo cited decades of authoritarian governments and an economic inequality that has left millions in poverty despite Angola's oil, diamonds and other resources.

"We still don't have democracy, don't have freedom," said Nkilumbo, who added he wanted the pope to be a pilgrim for peace and reconciliation but to also bring a forceful message calling for social justice. "In my view, the pope knows the real situation of Angola."

Nkilumbo said he was not a Catholic but praised the Catholic Church in Angola, the country's dominant religious denomination, for being at the forefront of that fight for equality.

Epalanga plays that role. In addition to his work as a priest, he is executive secretary of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Angola, which actively works to promote democracy and ease poverty and inequality, often challenging authorities.

Epalanga said he was one of many members of the church invited to an audience with Pope Leo in Angola. If he has the chance to speak to the pope, Epalanga said he would "thank him for coming and ask him to tell the bishops they should be more committed to the poor and to social justice."

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