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Pope Leo XIV takes a moment to speak with journalists aboard the papal flight from Angola to Equatorial Guinea April 21, 2026. Leo paused to honor his predecessor on the first anniversary of Pope Francis' death, remembering the Argentine pope's witness to mercy and closeness to the poor. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Aboard the papal flight from Equatorial Guinea — April 21, 2026
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The globetrotting and periphery-minded Pope Francis would have likely been pleased that his successor found himself flying between two missionary nations on the first anniversary of his death.

En route to Equatorial Guinea from Angola to inaugurate the final leg of his four-nation tour through Africa, Pope Leo XIV praised the example of his predecessor whom he remembered for "truly living out closeness to the most poor."

"He left so much to the church, with his witness and his word," Leo told reporters aboard the papal plane, recalling the late pope's efforts of "looking to promote an authentic respect for all men and women, promoting this spirit of fraternity."

Francis dedicated *Fratelli Tutti*, one of his four papal encyclicals, one of the most authoritative teaching documents a pope can issue, on the theme of "fraternity and social friendship."

Leo also remembered his example of mercy, recalling his predecessor's first Sunday Angelus address as pope, in which Francis said that "God never ever tires of forgiving us."

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The pope then recalled a Mass celebrated by Francis at the Vatican just three days after his election to the papacy, where he said that mercy is "the Lord’s most powerful message."

Leo noted how, in that instance, Francis "spoke from the heart of the mercy of God, how he spoke from the heart of this great love, of forgiveness, of this generous expression of the mercy of the Lord."

"And he wanted to share this spirit with the whole church," he continued.

The pope also pointed to the extraordinary Jubilee year on the theme of mercy launched by Francis in 2015, which he inaugurated in the Central African Republic by opening a holy door in the cathedral at Bangui, the nation's capital. Such a move is highly rare for popes; extraordinary holy years called in 1933 and 1983 to commemorate significant anniversaries of Jesus' passion and resurrection.

"Let us pray that he, already, may be enjoying the Lord's mercy, and we thank the Lord for the great gift of the life of Francis for the whole church and the whole world," Leo said on the plane shortly after leaving Angola.

The pope also said that it is "not yet decided when there will be the creation of new cardinals," when asked by an Angolan journalist if the country can expect another red hat after its sole cardinal, Alexandre do Nascimento of Luanda, died in September 2024.

"The question must be seen at a global level," he said. "We hope that for Africa and maybe for Angola in the future as well — I won't say near, a bit farther away — the nomination, the creation of new cardinals, can be considered."

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

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