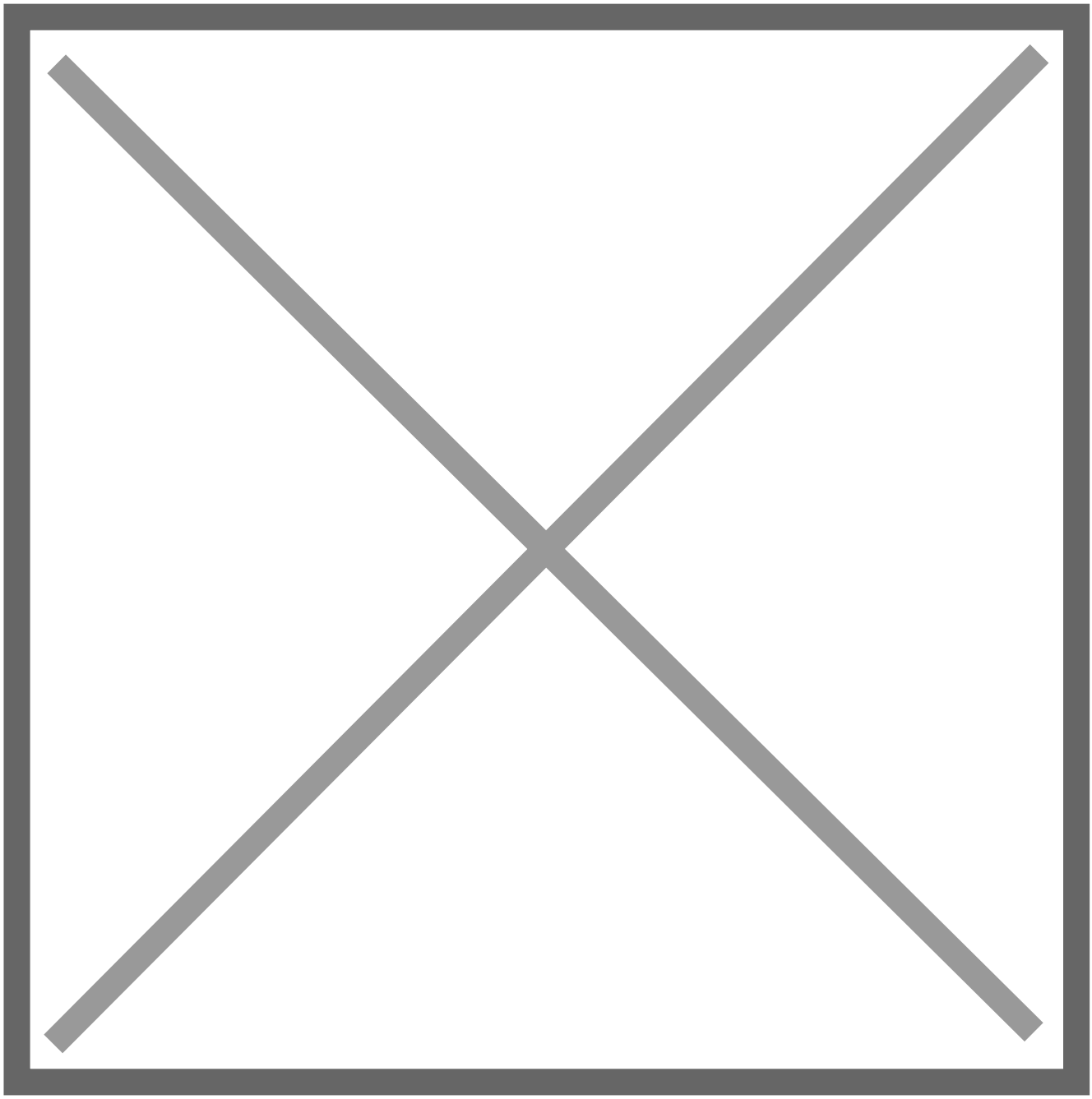
Vatican
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Women watch a large screen outside the Basilica of St. Mary Major (Santa Maria Maggiore) in Rome April 21, 2026, as Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, dean of the College of Cardinals, celebrates a Mass inside the basilica for the first anniversary of Pope Francis' death. (OSV News/Reuters/Yara Nardi)

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Rome — April 22, 2026
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On the first anniversary of Pope Francis' death, Pope Leo XIV praised his predecessor's "courageous witness" as "a significant heritage for the Church."

Leo, who is in Equatorial Guinea on the last leg of his apostolic trip, sent a message April 21 to Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, dean of the College of Cardinals.

The message was read by the cardinal at a Mass at Rome's Basilica of St. Mary Major, where the late pontiff is buried not far from the chapel housing the Marian icon Salus Populi Romani ("health of the Roman People"), where Francis prayed before and after every international trip.

In his message, the pope recalled his predecessor's death in 2025 on Easter Monday, saying he concluded "his earthly pilgrimage in the embrace of the Risen Christ, in that 'joy of the Gospel' which inspired one of his most significant apostolic exhortations."

"His magisterium was lived as that of a missionary disciple, as he liked to say. He remained a disciple of the Lord, faithful to his baptism and to his consecration in the episcopal ministry, to the very end," the pope said.

Remembering the late pontiff as "a caring shepherd," Leo said his predecessor touched the hearts of many people "thanks to his apostolic journeys and especially to that final 'journey,' which was his illness and his death."

He also noted that Francis, "in harmony with his predecessors," embraced the legacy of the Second Vatican Council and called on the church "to be open to mission, to be the guardian of the world's hope, and passionate in proclaiming that Gospel which is capable of giving fullness and happiness to every life."

"We still hear the echo of his exhortations, expressed in eloquent words to make the Good News more understandable: mercy, peace, fraternity, the 'smell of the sheep,' field hospital, and many others," the pope said. "Each of these expressions brings us back to the Gospel lived by him with a new language that proclaims the same Gospel as always."

Hundreds gathered to pray for the late pontiff at the Roman basilica where he is buried. The pope's simple tomb, engraved with his papal name in Latin — "Franciscus" — was adorned with yellow and white flowers.

On top of the marble slab lay a single white rose, with a lit oil lamp in front.

After reading Leo's message, Re said the heart of the pope's message was "a vibrant invitation to safeguard the spiritual legacy of the late Pope Francis."

The keywords often used by the late pontiff and highlighted by his successor, the 92-year-old cardinal said, are teachings "that we must preserve and make bear fruit."

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Recalling Francis' devotion to Mary, Re prayed that the Mother of God, "so loved and venerated by the late pontiff, who wished to be buried in this Marian shrine, help us."

Among the tributes that poured in throughout the day from world leaders and notable figures was an op-ed by Italian President Sergio Mattarella, published April 21 in the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano.

In his editorial, Mattarella said the bond between the late pontiff and the Italian people was "strong and affectionate" and that, as a shepherd, his voice resonated "beyond every geographical, religious and cultural boundary."

"One year has passed since the death of the deeply beloved Pope Francis, and the Italian people preserve with affection and gratitude the memory of his figure and his teaching," Mattarella wrote.

The Italian president said that as a religious leader, the late pope "made his teaching and his influence felt in the world" and encouraged people "not to yield to indifference and despair," but to practice "the patient art of dialogue and exchange."

"Pope Francis knew how to speak to the world with the frank and essential language of the Gospel and with the wisdom born of knowledge of human beings and of history, aware and untroubled by the risk of appearing utopian or of going against the current," he wrote.

Mattarella described the pope's legacy as that of "a universal point of reference for believers and nonbelievers," who called on everyone to "fully rediscover their humanity, to resist the temptation of hatred, exclusion and waste."

"Until the end, even during his long and arduous illness, Pope Francis remained a tireless bearer of the message of peace and love," the Italian president wrote. "Today, one year after his passing, we renew our gratitude for the teaching of Francis, which represents a source of hope for all men and women of peace."

A Latin commemorative plaque has been unveiled in the chapel housing the Salus Populi Romani icon, which he venerated 126 times, according to the inscription.

"Francis, Supreme Pontiff, who 126 times devoutly stood at the feet of the Mother of the Salvation of the Roman People, by his own will rests in this Papal Basilica. April 21, 2026, first anniversary of his death," the plaque says.