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Pope Leo XIV speaks to journalists aboard a flight returning to Rome April 23, 2026, at the conclusion of his 11-day apostolic journey to Africa. (OSV News/Andrew Medichini, pool via Reuters)



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"As a pastor, I cannot be in favor of war," Pope Leo XIV said about the war in Iran during his airborne press conference upon his return trip to Rome. "If there is regime change or no regime change, the question is how to promote the values in which we believe without the death of so many innocent people."

Flying high over the Sahara Desert after leaving Equatorial Guinea, Leo once again expressed his concern over the war in Iran, a position which garnered a vociferous social media attack from President Donald Trump at the outset of his trip through Africa 11 days ago.

Returning to Rome on April 23, the pope took questions from journalists in the traditional post-trip, in-flight press conference on topics of war, migration, same-sex blessings and the nature of his visits with the authoritarian leaders throughout Africa.

On the negotiations around the war in Iran, he said that Iran's innocent civilian population must be kept in mind and that the stop-and-start peace negotiations between Iran and the United States "has created this chaotic situation for the global economy."

The pope called for the warring parties to "make every effort to promote peace" and to respect international law.

"It is very important that the innocent may be protected, which has not been the case in many places," he said, before continuing to reveal a personal anecdote.

The pope shared that he carries with him a photo of a Muslim boy holding a sign that reads "Welcome Pope Leo," taken during his December trip to Lebanon. He said that the boy was recently killed during the war, without specifying at what stage of the fighting or by which side.



Pope Leo XIV answers questions from journalists during a news conference aboard the plane flying back to Rome after leaving from Equatorial Guinea, April 23, 2026. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

The pope was asked directly if he condemns the Iranian regime, which has been accused of carrying out executions against prisoners and violently cracking down on protests that began in February.

"When a regime, when a country, takes decisions which takes away the lives of people unjustly then obviously that is something that should be condemned," the pope said, without explicitly naming Iran. "I condemn all actions that are unjust. I condemn the taking of people's lives. I condemn capital punishment."

Ahead of his June 6-12 trip to Spain where he will visit the Canary Islands, a migrant hotspot for African migrants entering Europe, Leo said that while borders should exist, the developed world must assist the Global South to support and receive migrants.

"I personally believe a state has a right to set rules at its borders. I am not saying that all must enter as if without order, sometimes creating more unjust situations where they arrive than those that they had left," he said. "But in saying this, I ask what we do in richer countries to change the situation in poorer countries," suggesting that governments and corporations help underdeveloped nations to reduce the need to emigrate.

Leo added that even if a country has no capacity for migrants, they must be treated "in a humanitarian way" and not "worse than house pets, animals, et cetera."

"When people arrive they are human beings and deserve the respect that every human being deserves," he said.

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Although the pope has not taken a strong public position on same-sex blessings within the Catholic Church, he was asked about the decision of Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich and Freising to issue in his diocese a guide for blessings of people in relationships outside of sacramental marriage, which includes same-sex couples.

"I think it's very important that the unity or division of the church should not revolve around sexual matters," Leo said, since issues of justice, equality and freedom of people and religion "would all take priority before that particular issue."

That said, Leo noted that the Vatican has already spoken to the German bishops to make clear its disagreement with the formalized blessing of same-sex couples "beyond what was specifically, if you will, allowed for by Pope Francis in saying that all people receive blessings."

A 2023 document approved by Leo's predecessor made explicit that "couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples" may receive an informal blessing from a priest, but without a formalized type of ceremony comparable to sacramental marriage.

"To go beyond that today, I think that the topic can cause more disunity than unity," Leo said. "We should look for ways to build our unity on Jesus Christ and what Jesus Christ teaches."

Leo was also asked about whether his tour through Africa, in which he traveled to four nations considered to be authoritarian, would legitimize the rule of their leaders.

"We are actually trying to find a way to apply the Gospel to concrete situations so that the lives of people can be improved," he said.

"We don't always make great proclamations, criticizing, judging or condemning, but there's an awful lot of work that goes on behind the scenes to promote justice, to promote humanitarian causes, to look for at times situations where there may be political prisoners and finding ways for them to be freed," the pope continued.

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After Leo's trip was initially overshadowed by the virtual invective spewed at him by President Donald Trump, and his subsequent response that he had "no fear of the Trump administration," the pope told reporters before answering questions that the purpose of his apostolic voyages is "to meet, accompany, to know the people of God," even though "many times the interest is rather political."

"I have talked about justice, and there are issues there, but that is not the first word," he said. "The trip is to be interpreted above all as an expression of wanting to announce the Gospel." After the pope decried the state of the world "ravaged by a handful of tyrants" in northwestern Cameroon, he told journalists that his message was not directed toward Trump despite much media coverage framing his words as such.

The moment marked a rare instance of a pope weighing in on his own depiction in the media, and by presenting the motive for his trip on his return flight in an unprompted move Leo showed once again that he is willing to intervene in the narrative around his pontificate.

"It is true that many times it is necessary to make comments, or look to how to encourage the people themselves to assume responsibility for their lives," Leo told journalists at the outset of his flight before taking questions. "The trip is to be interpreted above all as an expression of wanting to announce the Gospel, of proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ, which is a way of being close to people in their happiness, in the depth of their faith, but also in their suffering."

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

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