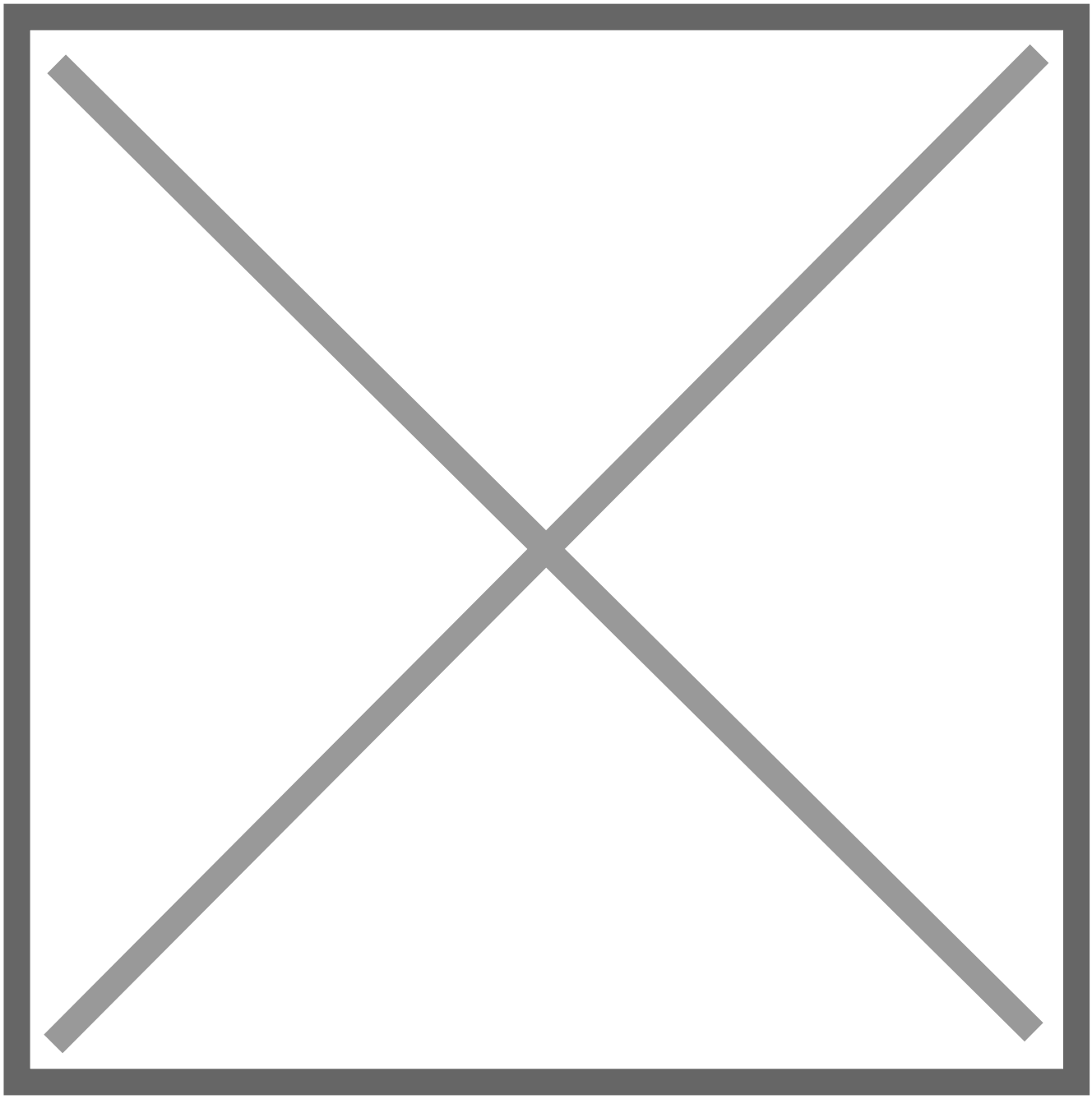
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Pilgrims gather as Pope Leo XIV leads the "Regina Caeli" prayer in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican May 10, 2026. At the end of the "Regina Caeli," Leo thanked the people of Spain's Canary Islands after passengers exposed to hantavirus aboard a cruise ship were allowed to disembark on the island of Tenerife. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Elisabetta Trevisan)

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Pope Leo XIV thanked the people of Spain's Canary Islands after passengers exposed to hantavirus aboard a cruise ship were allowed to disembark on the island of Tenerife.

"I would like to thank the people of the Canary Islands who, with the hospitality characteristic of them, welcomed the cruise ship MV Hondius and the passengers infected with the hantavirus," the pope said May 10 after praying the Regina Caeli prayer with pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square.

The pope, who is set to visit Spain in June, said he was looking forward "to seeing all of you next month during my visit to the islands."

Hours earlier, the Dutch-operated cruise ship docked at the port of Granadilla in Tenerife, according to BBC News. The World Health Organization said eight cases of hantavirus have been reported aboard the ship, and three passengers have died.

Passengers were evacuated and repatriated to their home countries, where they will be quarantined and monitored for symptoms. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, symptoms can appear one to eight weeks after exposure.

Hantavirus is a respiratory disease "primarily acquired through contact with the urine, feces or saliva of infected rodents or by touching contaminated surfaces," the WHO stated.

The CDC said the Andes virus — a strain of hantavirus that causes severe respiratory illness — is the only hantavirus known to spread from person to person, though such transmission is rare.

The cases aboard the cruise ship involved the Andes virus, prompting protests from some Canary Islands residents concerned about the ship's arrival.

In a May 5 interview with COPE, the radio network of the Spanish bishops' conference, Fernando Clavijo, regional president of the Canary Islands, accused Spain’s central government, led by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, of changing an initial agreement regarding the evacuation of passengers.

According to Clavijo, the original plan was "to evacuate the hantavirus patients by air ambulance, and for the rest to remain on the ship and be transferred to the country of origin of this vessel, which is the Netherlands."

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Clavijo said he learned through media reports that the ship would be allowed to make port in the Canary Islands.

Clavijo told COPE that the Spanish government did not consult him or give sufficient information. "I am not going to blindly jeopardize the safety of the Canary Islands population with a government that is not behaving loyally."

In a statement published May 9, WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus sought to calm fears among Tenerife residents about the possibility of another pandemic.

"I know you are worried. I know that when you hear the word 'outbreak' and watch a ship sail toward your shores, memories surface that none of us have fully put to rest. The pain of 2020 is still real, and I do not dismiss it for a single moment," Ghebreyesus said.

"But I need you to hear me clearly: this is not another COVID. The current public health risk from hantavirus remains low. My colleagues and I have said this unequivocally, and I will say it again to you now," he added.

The ship’s arrival also raised concerns less than a month before Leo is scheduled to visit Tenerife and the Canary Islands during his seven-day trip to Spain.

At a May 6 news conference hosted by the Spanish bishops' conference, a journalist asked Bishop José Mazuelos Pérez of the Canary Islands whether the ship's arrival "could endanger the pope's visit."

"I hope not," Mazuelos answered. "If things are handled properly, the situation can be controlled."

Mazuelos, who studied and practiced medicine before entering the seminary, said viral infections can emerge unexpectedly despite medical advances.

"When I studied medicine, we were told in preventive medicine that we think we have infections and viruses under control, but in reality, we do not have complete control," he said. "Antibiotics have reached a balance that could be disrupted when we least expect it."

Still, he said, authorities have the current situation under control, and it is unlikely to escalate into a pandemic.

"This case is being monitored and is under control," he said. "Right now, a pandemic is not expected, and we hope, God willing, that it remains that way."