News



New graduates are pictured during commencement at Villanova Stadium in Villanova, Pennsylvania, on May 19, 2026. (Courtesy of Villanova University)



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Universities across the United States attract A-listers to address their new graduates, but only one received a message from the head of the global Catholic Church: Pope Leo XIV's alma mater, Villanova University.

"Graduates, it is fitting that I share with you today a message from a very special member of our Villanova community," said Augustinian Fr. Peter Donohue, the university's president, in presenting the surprise message May 19. "Pope Leo XIV has asked me to share these words with you as you begin your journey beyond Villanova."

In the message, read by Donohue during Villanova's commencement ceremony, Leo, the first pope to belong to the Augustinian religious order, urged the new graduates to carry the school's Augustinian values with them as they enter a world marked by both promise and peril.

"The world beyond Villanova is waiting for you, sometimes with open arms, and sometimes with truly dangerous intent," the pope wrote. "You will have the challenge and the opportunity to make a big difference if you carry with you those Augustinian values of *Veritas, Unitas, Caritas*."



Augustinian Fr. Peter Donohue, Villanova University president, poses with Craig Melvin, co-host of "Today" who served as commencement speaker, at Villanova Stadium in Villanova, Pennsylvania, on May 19, 2026. Donohue read a message from Pope Leo XIV to the new graduates. (Courtesy of Villanova University)

Addressing students at the university in the suburbs of Philadelphia, where preparations are underway for celebrations of the United States' semiquincentennial, the first U.S.-born pope also encouraged graduates to remember the ideals at the heart of the American founding.

"This being the 250th anniversary of the United States of America, I would invite you to recall in a special way the guiding principles of the foundations of our nation." Leo wrote.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all [people] are created equal; that they are endowed by our Creator with the pursuit of Happiness, and among those are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," he wrote, quoting the Declaration of

Independence signed some 10 miles away from Villanova's campus in Philadelphia's Independence Hall.

"May the graduates of 2026 always be faithful to the guiding light that has been so important for these 250 years," he continued.



Pope Leo XIV smiles as he greets visitors and pilgrims from the popemobile while riding around St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican before his weekly general audience May 20, 2026. Leo wrote a message to graduates of his alma mater Villanova University that Augustinian Fr. Peter Donohue read at the university's commencement on May 19, 2026. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

The Vatican has announced that Leo will not travel to the United States during the country's anniversary, a decision that came long before the public spat between the pope and U.S. President Donald Trump last month.

Instead, the pope will spend July 4 visiting the Italian island of Lampedusa, a major arrival point for migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea and the destination of

Pope Francis' first trip outside Rome as pope.

Leo, however, will address Americans in live remarks broadcasted on Philadelphia's Independence Mall on the eve of the country's semiquincentennial to receive the National Constitution Center's Liberty Medal, awarded annually to an individual who advanced freedom and human dignity worldwide. It is the first time a pope will be given the award.

As pope, Leo has maintained a visible connection with his alma mater, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science in mathematics in 1977. (That would also mean the pope was living outside of Philadelphia during the country's bicentennial in 1976.)

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Villanova, a college basketball powerhouse, will open its men and women's 2026-2027 seasons in Rome against the University of Notre Dame; the athletes and university officials are expected to have an audience with the pope ahead of the game.

Leo also met with a group of 19 Villanova students and faculty last October, and that same month received participants in a conference on migration organized by the university.

Augustinian Fr. Rob Hagan, chaplain of the Villanova men's basketball team, told The Philadelphia Inquirer last year that when the pope was a bishop in Peru he joined group chats of other Villanova alumni to follow the team's runs in the 2016 and 2018 NCAA tournament.

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