Opinion
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Pope Leo XIV greets visitors and pilgrims from the popemobile while riding around St. Peter's

Pope Leo XIV 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. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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The internet did a double take earlier this month with an image of Pope Leo XIV walking on grass and looking down. He was wearing an ivory cassock and, to everyone's surprise, white Nikes with a black swoosh.

Then last weekend, just as this photo was losing traction (so to speak), the leader of the world's Catholics did something most people without 12-year-olds around only know vaguely about: the viral "6-7" meme. And with that, the internet was once again off and running.

For many, these images gave the pope's cool factor a definite boost, although I am probably aging myself by using the word "cool." Online, particularly for the sneaker choice, some said he was auramaxxing, others said he had serious drip, using expressions to describe a sense of confidence and fashion style that aren't part of the Vatican vernacular, or my own.

People could not get over the fact that the pope would wear a pair of Nikes. An online sneaker news platform, yes, those exist, was quick to identify the exact sneaker — Nike Franchise Low Plus — said to be a fairly obscure tennis shoe that first appeared in the '70s and '80s and was rereleased in 2008.

Well, that tracks, as the kids say. Leo does play tennis.

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Social media, at least in my own algorithm, ate it up, and news outlets — like The New York Times and GQ Magazine — also reported on the pope's sneakers.

But the internet, being what it is, also had some negative reactions, primarily in the comment sections. People chimed in that the whole sneaker thing was not befitting the office of the Catholic Church leader, but they failed to take into account that this image isn't new. The photo's age got lost on social media as people seemed to think it was an image of the pope right now, maybe taking a stroll on the Vatican grounds

Turns out the undated Nike reveal was a screenshot, which appears 50 seconds in on a trailer of a documentary "Leone a Roma" about the pope's years in Rome — in the 1980s and early 2000s. The documentary was just released by Vatican media near the pope's one-year anniversary.

While the sneaker bit was still sinking in, social media and news outlets pivoted to the viral video posted on TikTok by an Italian priest showing the pope's interaction with a group of Italian confirmation students at the Vatican.

Leo followed the group's prompting of the up and down palms raised hand gesture that goes along with the expression "6-7" which gave him immediate street cred with the middle school crowd for briefly speaking their language. He speaks five languages and can read two more, so it's not that surprising that he seemed comfortable with picking up on a middle school expression that is a language all its own. And the general public seemed to appreciate it too because as of May 20 the interaction of just seconds had 28.9 million views.

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The pope's quick interaction with these young people might not have had the same impact as the Nikes photo because, well, not everyone gets this meme. In fact when I asked my husband on Sunday while we were having lunch if he heard about the pope going viral doing "6-7," he replied, "What's 6-7?"

I can't really explain it, but Webster's Dictionary defines it as "a nonsensical expression used especially by teens and tweens that is connected to a rap song and also to a 6' 7" tall basketball player" and dictionary.com named it its word of the year last year.

The pope got definite props for joining in on a ubiquitous trend and smiling, being a good sport. But naysayers, again in the comments, thought participating in the meme was not becoming for someone in the church's high office.

But both these instances give us small glimpses into who the pope is and a view of what so many people are also looking for — a small connection with a church leader, a sign that he is a real person who happens to be in a powerful role.

The pope's office certainly has plenty of mystique but we're reminded every so often that Leo is in fact a regular person, someone who had a life before being selected to lead the world's 1.4 billion Catholics and someone who can also speak the language of so many of us.