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Pope Leo XIV rides on his popemobile during his one-day pastoral visit in Acerra, Italy, May 23, 2026. (AP/Salvatore Laporta)

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Acerra, Italy — May 23, 2026

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Pope Leo XIV on May 23 greeted one by one families who lost loved ones to illegal toxic dumping in an area near Naples, as many paused to share photographs and other mementos of children and young people who have died or are battling cancer — illnesses tied to a multi-billion criminal racket run by the mafia.

Leo's visit to the so-called Terra dei Fuochi, or Land of Fires, came on the eve of the 11th anniversary of Pope Francis' big ecological encyclical *Laudato Si'* , and indicates Leo's commitment to carry on his predecessor's environmental agenda.

"I have come first of all to gather the tears of those who have lost loved ones, killed by environmental pollution caused by unscrupulous people and organizations who for too long were able to act with impunity," Leo said in remarks to family members and local clergy inside Acerra's cathedral.

The pontiff recalled that the area now dubbed the Land of Fires was once called "*Campania felix*," Latin for blessed or fruitful countryside, "capable for enchanting for its fertility, its produce and its culture, like a hymn to life.

"And yet — here is death, of the land and of men,'' the pope said.



Illegal waste is seen on the side of a road in the outskirts of the southern Italian town of Acerra in the Terra dei Fuochi, or Land of Fires, an area scarred by decades of pollution from illegal waste dumping and burning, much of it linked to organized criminal groups, May 22, 2026, a day ahead of Pope Leo XIV's visit. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

The European Court of Human Rights last year validated a generation of residents' complaints that mafia dumping, burial and burning of toxic waste led to an increased rate of cancer and other ailments in the area of 90 municipalities around Caserta and Naples, encompassing a population of 2.9 million people.

The court found Italian authorities had known since 1988 about the toxic pollution, blamed on the Camorra crime syndicate that controls waste disposal, but failed to take necessary steps to protect the residents. The binding ruling gave Italy two years to set up a database about the toxic waste and verified health risks associated with living there.

Bishop Antonio Di Donna in opening remarks estimated 150 young people had died in the city of some 58,000 over the past three decades. He said that the number didn't take into account adults and victims in other municipalities.

He urged the pope to admonish those who continue to pollute, noting that the dumping of tons of toxic waste was reported a day earlier near Castera. Di Donna said that Italian officials had identified dozens more human-caused contamination sites throughout the country, including the Venetian port of Marghera, and the leaching of PFAS forever chemicals into groundwater near Vicenza.

"We say to those brothers of ours ensnared in evil and seized by a mirage of fabulous earnings: Convert, change your ways, because what you are doing is not only a crime, it is a sin that cries out to God for vengeance,'' the bishop said.



Angelo Venturato talks during an interview with the Associated Press next to photos of his daughter Maria, who died at of 25 of a cancer he claims to be connected to decades of pollution from illegal waste dumping and burning, much of it linked to organized criminal groups, in the southern town of Acerra, May 22, 2026. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

The pope later greeted the mayors of the 90 communities impacted by the toxic dumping, and greeted thousands of people waving yellow flags and chanting "Papa Leone" along the route of his popemobile and in a central piazza.

The victims include Maria Venturato, who died of cancer in 2016 at the age of 25. Her father, Angelo, said he hopes to speak with the pope to explain their reality, "not for me … for the next generation."

"I'd like to give these young people a future, so I'm asking for the pope's help with this. That is, I'm making a strong appeal to him to go to those in power and say, 'Look, let's heal this land of fires,'" he said on the eve of the pope's visit.

Inside the cathedral, Filomena Carolla presented the pope with a book containing memories from the life of her daughter, Tina De Angelis, who died of cancer at the age of 24.

"I'm just angry at the people who poisoned the soil, because what did our children have to do with it? What did they have to do with it, so young," Carolla told The Associated Press on May 22.

Francis' plans to visit the area in 2020 were canceled due to the pandemic.

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