Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Leo XIV attends the presentation of "Magnifica Humanitas" at the Vatican's Synod Hall May 25, 2026, the first encyclical of his papacy, which focused on the rise of artificial intelligence. (OSV News/Reuters/Yara Nardi)

Nicole Winfield

View Author Profile

Paolo Santalucia

View Author Profile

The Associated Press

View Author Profile

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — May 25, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Leo XIV made a historic apology on Monday for the role the Holy See itself played in legitimizing slavery and for having failed to condemn it for centuries, calling the Vatican's record a "wound in Christian memory."

Past popes have apologized for Christians' involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. But no pope has ever publicly acknowledged, much less apologized for, the role that past popes themselves played in giving European sovereigns explicit authority to subjugate and enslave "infidels."

History's first U.S.-born pope, whose family history includes both enslaved people and slave owners, delivered the apology in his first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, ("Magnificent Humanity"), which was released Monday.

The sweeping manifesto is about safeguarding humanity in an era of increasing reliance on artificial intelligence. Leo raised the trans-Atlantic slave trade in relation to what he called the new forms of slavery and colonialism that the digital revolution is fueling, such as the unregulated labor required to procure rare minerals needed for AI chips.

In doing so, Leo responded to decades of calls by Black American Catholics, activists and scholars for the Holy See to atone for its own role in the colonial-era trade in human beings.

**Related:** Sojourner Truth, Sister Thea and the preaching of Black Catholic women

"It is impossible not to feel deep sorrow when contemplating the immense suffering and humiliation endured by so many in stark contrast to their immeasurable dignity as persons infinitely loved by the Lord," Leo wrote. "For this, in the name of the Church, I sincerely ask for pardon."

### Centuries of legitimizing slavery for European colonizers

The Vatican has insisted that it always upheld the dignity of all human beings as children of God. But a series of 15th-century directives from the Vatican authorized Portuguese sovereigns to conquer Africa and the Americas and enslave non-Christians.

In 1452, for example, Pope Nicholas V issued the papal bull Dum Diversas, which gave the Portuguese king and his successors the right "to invade, conquer, fight and subjugate" and take all possessions — including land — of "Saracens, and pagans, and other infidels, and enemies of the name of Christ" anywhere.

The bull also gave the Portuguese permission "to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery."

An image of St. Josephine Bakhita, a former Sudanese slave who became a nun, hangs from t

An image of St. Josephine Bakhita, a former Sudanese slave who became a nun, hangs from the facade of St. Peter's Basilica Oct. 1, 2000. (OSV News/Reuters/Paolo Cocco)

That bull and another issued three years later, Romanus Pontifex, formed the basis of the Doctrine of Discovery, the theory that legitimized the colonial-era seizure of land in Africa and the Americas.

Nicholas V's permissions to the Portuguese were confirmed or renewed by Pope Callixtus III in 1456, Pope Sixtus IV in 1481, and Pope Leo X in 1514, according to the Rev. Christopher J. Kellerman, a Jesuit priest and author of "All Oppression Shall Cease: A History of Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Catholic Church."

Spanish kings received the rights for the Americas.

In 2023, the Vatican formally repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery, but it never formally rescinded, abrogated or rejected the bulls themselves. The Vatican insists that a later bull, *Sublimis Deus* in 1537, reaffirmed that Indigenous peoples shouldn't be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, and weren't to be enslaved.

**Related:** Vatican formally repudiates 'Doctrine of Discovery' used to justify colonization

## Holy See late to condemn slavery, Leo says

In his encyclical, Leo recalled that his namesake, Pope Leo XIII was the first pope to explicitly condemn slavery in 1888, though that was long after many countries had already abolished it. Before that, in antiquity and the Middle Ages, even church institutions had slaves.

In acknowledging the Holy See's own role and the 15th-century papal bulls, Leo wrote in his encyclical: "Already in the early modern period, the Apostolic See of Rome, responding to the requests of sovereigns, intervened several times in order to regulate and legitimize forms of subjugation, and, in certain cases, including the enslavement of 'infidels.'"

Advertisement

Leo said that it wasn't possible to judge the morality of the decisions with today's standards.

"Yet neither can we deny or diminish the delay with which both society and the church came to denounce the scourge of slavery," he said.

The pope said that the church has long affirmed the dignity of every human being as the basis of its doctrine, "even if it took eighteen centuries for its full incompatibility with slavery to be explicitly recognized."

"This constitutes a wound in Christian memory, one from which we cannot consider ourselves detached," he said.

Leo said that the church today must firmly condemn all forms of trafficking related to the digital technological revolution "if we want to avoid the need to ask for pardon again in the future for having failed to respect the treasure of human dignity that is required by our faith."

## Leo's own family history and past apologies

During a 1985 visit to Cameroon, St. John Paul II asked forgiveness of Africans for the slave trade on behalf of Christians who participated in it, but not for the popes'

own role in it. In a 1992 visit to Goree Island, Senegal, which was the largest slave-trading center in West Africa, he denounced the injustice of slavery and called it a "tragedy of a civilization that called itself Christian."

According to genealogical research published by Henry Louis Gates Jr., 17 of Leo's American ancestors were Black, listed in census records as mulatto, Black, Creole or a free person of color. His family tree includes slaveholders and enslaved people, Gates wrote in The New York Times.

During a visit to Angola last month, Leo prayed at a Catholic shrine located at the site of an important hub of the African slave trade during Portugal's colonial rule. While at the Sanctuary of Mama Muxima, Leo recalled the "sorrow and great suffering" Angolans endured for centuries, but he didn't refer specifically to slavery.

**Related:** Pope Leo XIV's Creole heritage highlights complex history of racism and the church in America
This story appears in the **AI Encyclical: Magnifica Humanitas** feature series. View the full series.