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Chicago's Mayor Brandon Johnson attends an interview in a cafe in Rome May 29, 2026. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson cast Pope Leo XIV as a powerful global ally on social justice, migration and reparations after meeting the Chicago-born pontiff at the Vatican, saying their shared roots and priorities could help amplify efforts to protect vulnerable communities.

"As the mayor of Chicago, we are incredibly elated and proud of him," Johnson told The Associated Press in an interview May 29, a day after meeting the American pope in a private audience.

The mayor said it was comforting to know that someone who comes from the city of Chicago "can speak to justice" and defend "the most vulnerable among us."

Johnson, a first-term progressive Democrat leading the third-largest U.S. city, traveled to Rome with a delegation of some 50 local officials, drawing strong media interest. He is a leading critic of U.S. President Donald Trump and has applauded Leo for pushing back against the war in Iran and Trump administration immigration policies.

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Johnson said he used the meeting to thank the pope "for his courage and his strength and particularly his moral stance," framing the encounter as a convergence of civic leadership and moral authority.

He noted the meeting underscored areas of alignment between Chicago's policy agenda and the pope's emphasis on social justice, particularly on the legacy of slavery and the treatment of migrants.

Johnson said the pontiff's apology for the Catholic Church's role in slavery reinforced his administration's push for reparations, including efforts to fund a task force examining the lasting impact on Black Americans.

"The fact that the pope made a very clear declaration apologizing for the church's role in slavery … is an affirmation to the work that we're doing," he said.

Johnson stressed the visit reflects an effort to position Chicago within a broader international push for human rights, with the pope's global influence lending weight to the city's agenda on justice, migration and reparative policies — and potentially extending that message well beyond the U.S.

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Focus on migrants' conditions amid US crackdown

Migration was also central to their discussion. Johnson said Pope Leo asked directly about conditions in Chicago following a broader U.S. immigration crackdown and efforts to deport migrants.

"He wanted to know the conditions on the ground in Chicago … how we were responding," Johnson said, adding the pontiff was aware of "the mass effort to deport immigrants from the city of Chicago and really around the country."

Johnson described outlining the city's response to migrants facing fear and uncertainty, including rapid-response efforts to ensure families had access to schools and basic necessities. He also highlighted executive actions intended to shield migrants, saying Chicago's approach has been adopted by other municipalities.

Johnson framed the meeting as the beginning of broader cooperation between city government and the Vatican. "We talked about how his pulpit and my pen can come together to protect all of humanity," he said, referencing both descendants of enslaved people and immigrant communities.

The mayor also emphasized the shared Chicago background, saying the city's history of activism makes it "uniquely positioned for this moment." On May 28, he marked the visit by presenting Leo with a key to the city and inviting him to celebrate Mass in Chicago's Grant Park.

It's at least the second official invitation that Leo has received to visit the United States. U.S. Vice President JD Vance invited Leo soon after he became pope last May.