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Visitors admire one of the facades of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, Spain, Friday, May 15, 2026. (AP/Emilio Morenatti)

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Madrid — June 2, 2026

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Until three years ago, Sara Cabral's faith experience was on trend with other Southern European youth — a "Catholic but never practicing" upbringing with little relevance to her life on Spain's Canary Islands.

Then she listened to a song from a faith youth group that felt as if God were speaking to her. She joined the group, and now in addition to its weekly adoration with music sessions, Cabral is excitedly preparing to attend Pope Leo XIV's Mass in Gran Canaria with her friends.

"You get a restlessness about an emptiness that you don't know how to fill," Cabral, 26, says of her embrace of Catholicism. "God is the one looking for you first, but you need to go meet him."

On trips to Spain this month and France in September, Leo will find thousands of young people like her in these traditionally Catholic but now staunchly secular countries, where historic churches are abundant and Mass attendance is sparse.

Church leaders and some experts see the success of youth movements and the surge in adult baptisms as signs that some young people are showing new interest in the church, while also challenging it to embrace a more inclusive message.

"They are drawing near with a look of surprise," said Fr. Josetxo Vera, spokesperson for Spain's Catholic Bishops Conference. "It's an excellent opportunity that bursts forth from heaven, not from the church."

A drop in faith practice creates a blank slate

Vera has seen many teens "scare" their atheist parents by asking to be baptized after becoming aware of, and attracted to, Christian messages spread in popular culture — like Catalan pop star Rosalía and her recent, spirituality-infused album Lux.

They're approaching faith in a drastically different environment than their parents and grandparents.

Until 1975, Spain was ruled by dictator Gen. Francisco Franco, who aligned with a deeply traditional Catholic Church still reeling from the anticlerical violence of Spain's civil war. Becoming a democracy, the country saw "a kind of divorce

between popular piety and the church's religious culture," said Mónica Cornejo Valle, a religion professor at Complutense University in Madrid.

Wildly popular religious processions and feasts have continued to be held in most Spanish regions and it's hard to find a neighborhood or hamlet without some visible vestige of Spain's outsized importance in the global history of the spread of Catholicism.

There are nearly 23,000 active Catholic parishes — but new priestly ordinations haven't started to bounce back. Most Spanish adults, 80%, were raised Catholic but only 47% currently identify as such, including a meager 2% who joined the faith from non-Catholic upbringings, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2024.

Only about 16% of Spanish Catholics go to Mass at least weekly, according to the 2024 Pew survey, even though it's an obligation for those practicing the faith.

One of Cabral's friends in Gran Canaria, José María Marrero, remembers attending Mass with his mother as a child, "and all you met were the old folks." His wife, a teacher who was baptized in her early 20s, told him some of her students on a recent trip saw a picture of Jesus and asked, "Miss, that's the Catholic one, right?"

In this overall environment, scholars like Cornejo Valle warn that a supposed revival in religiosity might amount to a "publicity effect" driven by a savvy use of media and popular culture.

But youth movement and church leaders see opportunity in this blank slate — especially if they "transmit Jesus' message with happiness, a message that's easy to understand," as Cabral puts it.

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Youth movements grow with appeals to belonging, solidarity

That's the case for the group Cabral and some 35,000 other youth belong to, Hakuna, which started in the early 2010s in a Madrid parish when a group of college students set up a weekly hour of Eucharistic adoration, preceded by a short lecture and followed by a meetup at a local bar.

The movement became an official lay organization of the Spanish church in 2017, and has grown into volunteer trips and concerts, with seven records launched of Christian music, said its spokeswoman, Maca Torres.

"It's the Holy Spirit, we're the first to be surprised" by the success, Torres said, adding that most members are people who had stopped practicing, though there are a few converts.

In Catholicism, infants are baptized — but more than 13,300 baptisms of people older than 7 were counted in the latest annual report from Spain's Catholic bishops conference.

And in France, a country whose approach to secularism is increasingly contested because of its strict regulation of religion in public life, some 13,000 adults were baptized at the Easter Vigil this year — 42% of them ages 18 to 25. That's according to the country's Conference of Catholic Bishops, which said that amounts to a tripling of such baptisms compared to 10 years ago.

Last summer at the Vatican, Leo encouraged a gathering of baptism candidates and newly baptized from France to share their experience of faith with others and let it guide their daily life.

"What a joy to see young people who are engaging with faith and want to give a sense to their life, by letting themselves be guided by Christ and his Gospel," Leo told them.

The appeal for young people, experts say, seems to be twofold — a disenchantment with other institutions and with the growing loneliness of life lived on social media, together with a church that, starting with Pope Francis, has focused less on doctrine and more on social justice.

On June 6, the first day of his trip to Spain, Leo will hold a prayer vigil with youth in a vast Madrid public square — but he's also later visiting a migrant center in the Canary Islands and a prison near Barcelona, outreach initiatives that tend to appeal to progressive youth.

"We don't think that the number of Catholic young people has grown by a lot, but we do see that in general the profile of the Catholic youth is more committed than before," Cornejo Valle said.

A quest for meaning that leads to the pews

María Salazar, 23, leads a Barcelona outpost of the global Catholic youth movement Effetá. She says many of her peers are looking for different forms of spirituality, within and outside the church.

"More than looking for faith, we look for a feeling of peace," Salazar said. "We live in a microwave society — everything has to be immediate — but the Lord doesn't work this way."

She said there's been "a boom of youth" in her parish, which also happens to be one of the most visited monuments in Europe — the Sagrada Familia, modernist architect Antoni Gaudí's unfinished masterpiece.

About 120 of them engage in adoration and weekend-long spiritual retreats, the first of which saw organizers and the basilica's rector stay up to prepare the church until well past midnight.

They also volunteer to help with the elderly going to Mass in the crypt and the international tourists flocking to worship services in the grand temple above it, where the pope will celebrate Mass on June 10 and inaugurate the new tower of Jesus Christ.

"We're going to have him here at home," Salazar gushed. "I see the tower from afar and I see the home that God gave us."

This story appears in the **Pope Leo in Spain** feature series. View the full series.