Lights illuminate the Basilica of the Holy Family, or Sagrada Família in Barcelona, Spain, June

Lights illuminate the Basilica of the Holy Family, or Sagrada Família in Barcelona, Spain, June 3, 2026. Pope Leo XIV will visit the famed basilica during his June 6-12 apostolic visit to Spain. (OSV News/Reuters/Nacho Doce)

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Pope Leo XIV's upcoming visit to the Basilica of the Holy Family in Barcelona highlights the relationship between the papacy and the sacred edifice, whose history has spanned more than a century.

Most notably, the pope's visit offers a unique historical symmetry: The basilica's cornerstone was laid in 1882 during the pontificate of Pope Leo XIII. Now, 144 years later, his namesake will inaugurate the 564-foot-tall Tower of Jesus Christ.

The idea of the basilica, known in Spanish as Sagrada Familia, was first proposed by St. Josep Manyanet Vives, a Catalan priest known for his devotion to the Holy Family. In 1871, a Catholic association dedicated to St. Joseph embarked on a pilgrimage to Rome, which included an audience with Pope Pius IX.

The association's founder, Josep Maria Bocabella, was inspired by the pilgrimage, which included a stop at the famed Marian shrine of Loreto, and by St. Manyanet's

vision, and proposed the building of the basilica.

Pope Benedict XVI leads the Angelus prayer outside the Basilica of the Holy Family, or Sagrad

Pope Benedict XVI leads the Angelus prayer outside the Basilica of the Holy Family, or Sagrada Família, after consecrating the altar during a dedication ceremony at the church in Barcelona, Spain, Nov. 7, 2010. Pope Leo XIV will visit the famed basilica during his June 6-12, 2026, apostolic visit to Spain. (OSV News/Reuters/Albert Gea)

The original neo-Gothic design of the basilica, intended to resemble the shrine in Loreto, was altered two years after the laying of the cornerstone due to differences between Bocabella and the project's first architect, Francisco de Paula del Villar.

The project was then continued by famed Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí, whose sainthood cause is underway.

Papal involvement with the basilica's construction was indirect until St. John Paul II visited the partially constructed basilica on Nov. 7, 1982.

Before praying the Angelus with thousands of faithful outside on a rainy day in Barcelona, St. John Paul reflected on the church as "the universal home of God's family, it is your home."

"This magnificent temple of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona seeks to be a visible expression of this mysterious reality, thanks to the inspiration of a soul particularly sensitive to all things ecclesial, like Father José Manyanet y Vives, and the work of art of the brilliant master Antoni Gaudí," the pope said.

The pope noted that while the basilica was "not yet finished," its presence has "been solid from the beginning," which he compared to "another structure built with living stones: the Christian family."

St. John Paul's words were engraved on a plaque commemorating his visit and placed in the basilica.

Tourists take pictures as they visit the Basilica of the Holy Family, or Sagrada Família, in Barc

Tourists take pictures as they visit the Basilica of the Holy Family, or Sagrada Família, in Barcelona, Spain, June 2, 2026. Pope Leo XIV will visit the famed basilica during his June 6-12 apostolic visit to Spain. (OSV News/Reuters/Nacho Doce)

The next time a Roman pontiff would visit the basilica was in 2010, when Pope Benedict XVI consecrated the altar during a dedication ceremony, thus opening it for public worship.

Honoring not only Gaudí's work but also his devotion to St. Joseph, Benedict said the basilica represented the example of "love, work and service lived in the presence of God, as the Holy Family lived them."

"As I contemplate with admiration this sacred space of marvelous beauty, of so much faith-filled history, I ask God that in the land of Catalonia new witnesses of holiness may rise up and flourish, and present to the world the great service that the church can and must offer to humanity: to be an icon of divine beauty, a burning flame of charity, a path so that the world may believe in the One whom God has sent," he said.

Although his successor, Pope Francis, did not visit Spain during his pontificate, he did send a video message in 2021 to mark the inauguration of the Tower of the Virgin Mary.

Noting the 452-foot-tall tower's 12-pointed star, Francis said it served as a reminder that Mary "is the star of the new evangelization" and a focal point of Gaudí's vision for the basilica.

"Gaudí wanted this mystery to crown the Portal of Faith — the first one he built — so that, as we recite the prayer to the Holy Trinity, we would learn to be, like Mary, a temple of this mystery, and to worship God in spirit and in truth," the pope said.

Francis also reflected on the basilica's namesake, the Holy Family, and the artistic representations in the Nativity Facade's Portal of Hope of the flight into Egypt and the death of the Holy Innocents, which he said mirrored the sufferings of the vulnerable in today's world.

"Gaudí represented it in the Portal of Hope, expressing with the faces of the workers the sufferings and difficulties that put them in communion with those suffered by the Holy Family, the exile to Egypt of so many poor people seeking a better future or fleeing from evil; the death of so many innocents who join those of Bethlehem," he said.

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While the Basilica of the Holy Family draws thousands each year, for Cardinal Juan Jose Omella of Barcelona, Leo's visit is a significant moment in its long history.

Noting the motto of the pope's visit, "Alzad la mirada" ("Lift up your eyes"), Omella said that "in some way, the pope comes to point us toward the cross."

"We are going to look toward Jesus Christ who gathers us together, and we are going to listen to the pope," he told journalists at a May 6 press conference in Madrid.

The Spanish cardinal noted that classical thinkers have said "that God has three attributes: the good, the true and the beautiful."

"I believe that in some way the pope's visit symbolizes these things," Cardinal Omella said. "There is great beauty; not only the beauty of the Sagrada Família, which is magnificent and which we will see during these days and during the liturgy celebrated there."

"There is also the beauty of charity, the beauty of educational life, catechetical life, the daily activity of the church, and the beauty of the liturgy," he said.

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