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Pablo Martínez Núñez, a veteran Iberia captain, is seen in a May 26, 2026, photo in Madrid. H

Pablo Martínez Núñez, a veteran Iberia captain, is seen in a May 26, 2026, photo in Madrid. He called piloting Pope Leo XIV from Madrid to Barcelona on June 9 the most meaningful flight of his 26-year career. The flight is part of Pope Leo's June 6-12 trip, which includes four Iberia-operated journeys within Spain and back to Rome. (OSV News/Courtesy Spanish bishops' conference)

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Pablo Martínez Núñez has spent 26 years flying for Iberia, piloting long-haul Airbus aircraft to destinations such as Lima, Peru.

But the veteran captain says the flight he is preparing to operate June 9 will stand apart from all the others.

"This will be, without discussion, the most special flight of my life," Martínez told OSV News.

Martínez will pilot the flight carrying Pope Leo XIV from Madrid to Barcelona during the pope's upcoming trip to Spain and the Canary Islands.

While many assume the pope travels aboard a Vatican-owned aircraft, often dubbed the Shepherd One by occasional observers, papal trips traditionally rely on commercial charter flights arranged with national carriers. For decades, popes departing Rome have flown with Italy's flagship airline — formerly Alitalia and now ITA Airways — while return flights are usually entrusted to the flagship airline of the country being visited.

In Spain, that honor has belonged to Iberia since 1982, when St. John Paul II paid the first of his five visits to Spain.

The June 6-12 trip will include four Iberia-operated flights within Spain and back to Rome, connecting Madrid, Barcelona and the Canary Islands.

Martínez said many Iberia crew members volunteered for the assignment, but the airline also considered employees' personal interest and religious convictions when selecting crews.

A practicing Catholic, Martínez said he first learned verbally that he would operate one of the pope's flights during a meeting with airline management. The confirmation came later when he received his official monthly flight schedule, with the Madrid-Barcelona route highlighted as a "special flight."

"If weather conditions cooperate and air traffic control allows it, my intention is to pass near the Sagrada Familia so the Holy Father can have a special view of it," he said.

The captain also hinted at surprises being prepared onboard, including music connected to the Augustinian order once led by Pope Leo XIV.

The Escolanía of El Escorial's music is expected to play onboard. The boys' choir belongs to the Augustinian-run Royal Monastery of El Escorial, the monumental 16th-century complex built by King Philip II. The choir's members receive both academic and musical education and sing regularly at liturgical celebrations throughout the school year.

Though Iberia crews regularly transport heads of state and dignitaries, Martínez acknowledged that flying the pope carries a unique emotional and spiritual weight.

"All flights in Iberia are special because we bring people together," he said. "But this one goes beyond the human and emotional level."

Though he refused to share what he hopes will be his greeting to the pope and his entourage, including 82 journalists, Martinez did say that he hopes to hand Pope Leo a photo of his wife and their two children.

"It's our 25th wedding anniversary this year, so I would like for him to bless my wife and our two children, who are in their early 20s, and like me, practicing Catholics," he said.

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