Vatican

View from the Vatican



Pope Leo XIV holds a personalized Mexican soccer jersey given to him by Vatican journalist Valentina Alazraki, from Mexico, June 6, on the flight from Rome to Madrid at the start of his visit to Spain. Leo said he hoped the World Cup, which starts June 11, would be a source of unity. (Vatican press pool)



by Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js

Join the Conversation

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

Aboard the papal plane — June 7, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The last time Pope Leo XIV departed for an international trip, to kick off his tour through Africa, he made headlines while airborne by responding to journalists about the digital diatribe launched against him by President Donald Trump just hours before takeoff.

This time, en route to Madrid to begin a seven-day visit to Spain June 6, the topic of conversation shifted in a decidedly different direction: sports.

Chicago White Sox paraphernalia has become a staple at the pope's general audience, and political leaders including Vice President JD Vance and Chicago mayor Brandon Johnson have gifted the pope sports gear, demonstrating the wide range of peoples' desire to connect with the somewhat inscrutable Leo through the most ordinary and popular of passions.

That disarming desire extended, too, to the more than 70 journalists accompanying Leo on his flight to Spain and who are still, 13 months into the pontificate, trying to decipher him. Among conversation and questions that included the serious (the pope lamented the "open wound" of abuse within the church) and the blatantly banal, sports were sprinkled in throughout the pope's airborne interactions.

Pope Leo XIV signs a baseball presented by Spanish photojournalist Daniel Ibanez Gutierrez a

Pope Leo XIV signs a baseball presented by Spanish photojournalist Daniel Ibanez Gutierrez aboard the papal flight from Rome to Madrid June 6, 2026, the start of his apostolic journey to Spain. (OSV News/Reuters/Violeta Alessandra Tarantino)

As the pope began to make his way down the tight plane aisle with about 30 minutes left on his two-and-a-half hour flight, the pope's exchanges with journalists typically consisted of small talk, requests for personal blessings and well-wishes for safe travels. But the subject almost immediately turned to the soccer World Cup, which will begin during Leo's trip to Spain on June 11.

Veteran Vatican journalist Valentina Alazraki, from Mexico, gifted Leo a Mexican soccer jersey with "León" across the back and number 14. The pope said he hoped the World Cup would be a source of unity.

Leo previously said in an interview that he would root for Peru and Italy in the World Cup, but neither team qualified for this year's tournament. On the plane he said that he would see who he would root for and that he hoped to watch some matches.

Toward the back of the plane, however, someone more directly asked Leo if would support the United States in the World Cup.

"I will certainly support the U.S., though I am not sure how many games I will be able to see," he said.

Advertisement

The pope's brother, John Prevost, told the National Catholic Reporter that Leo would typically watch international soccer matches while spending his summers in the United States.

Asked again about soccer en route to Madrid, the pope was asked to weigh in on one of European soccer's most intense rivalries, between Spanish clubs Real Madrid and F.C. Barcelona — both cities that are destinations on his trip through Spain.

"The pope is for all teams," he said with a smile, "but Prevost is (for) Real Madrid."

Leo was also asked to weigh in on tentative plans for the Chicago Bears to build a stadium and move to Hammond, Indiana. "That's out of my pay (scale)," he said.

And while the world is already well-aware of the Southside Chicago pope's affinity for the White Sox, I had a different sports request when my turn came to shake Leo's hand.

"Your Chicago White Sox play my Philadelphia Phillies today," I told Leo. "If you could hold off on your prayers for Chicago, that would go a long way."

In response I got a belly laugh.

After taking a beat to think over his answer, the pope said: "God has a different vision of sports than we do; however, Sox are doing pretty well this year."

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

This story appears in the **Pope Leo in Spain** and **World Cup 2026** feature series.