Fireworks explode at the end of a prayer vigil held by Pope Leo XIV at Plaza de Lima in Madrid

Fireworks explode at the end of a prayer vigil held by Pope Leo XIV at Plaza de Lima in Madrid June 6, 2026, during his apostolic journey to Spain. (OSV News photo/Reuters/Mohammed Salem)

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Madrid — June 6, 2026

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Pope Leo XIV urged half a million young people gathered in Madrid June 6 to reject superficiality and become "men and women of flesh and blood," telling them that the mission he entrusts to them is simply to "be human."

"The mission I entrust to you is precisely this: that you be human," the pope said during an evening prayer vigil in Madrid's Plaza de Lima. "Yes, be human: men and women of flesh and blood! Not mere appearances, but trustworthy faces."

"Be human as Christ is," he urged.

The gathering drew approximately 500,000 people and combined music, testimonies, Marian devotion and Eucharistic adoration in what organizers described as a "festival of faith." Young people began arriving hours before the pope's appearance, filling the plaza and surrounding streets in the heart of the Spanish capital.

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The scale of the gathering became apparent as Leo tried to reach the stage. The journey along Madrid's Paseo de la Castellana stretched for more than 20 minutes as the popemobile moved slowly through the sea of pilgrims, repeatedly stopping while Leo greeted the faithful. Along the route, he embraced worshippers lining the barriers and kissed dozens of babies passed forward by their parents.

Many others watched from apartment balconies and terraces overlooking the broad boulevard, creating a continuous presence along the route connecting the city center to the vigil site.

When he finally arrived at the stage in Plaza de Lima, the welcome only intensified. Thousands of young people waved Vatican and Spanish flags and broke into chants of "*Esta es la juventud del Papa*" ("This is the pope's youth"). Leo appeared visibly moved as he paused to take in the scene before Cardinal Jose Cobo of Madrid began the final part of the evening's program.

Pope Leo XIV holds the monstrance during a prayer vigil with young people at Plaza de Lima i

Pope Leo XIV holds the monstrance during a prayer vigil with young people at Plaza de Lima in Madrid June 6, 2026, during his apostolic journey to Spain. (OSV News/Reuters/Yara Nardi)

In a departure from the formal settings often associated with papal events, the dialogue unfolded on a stage arranged like a living room.

There, young people and the pope spoke about faith, vocation and the search for meaning, creating the impression of a conversation between generations united less by age than by a common desire to follow Christ. The exchange followed a performance from "Godspell," the musical produced by "Zorro" actor Antonio Banderas, which helped set the tone.

During a dialogue with young people, Leo reflected on saints who shaped his spiritual life, including St. John Chrysostom, St. Thomas of Villanova and St. Turibius

of Mogrovejo, the Spanish missionary bishop who evangelized Peru in the 16th century.

Asked about his own missionary years in Peru, the pope said he most treasured the witness of faith shown by people who faced hardship without losing hope.

"As I proclaimed the Gospel, I too was transformed by it," he said. " I have seen how the Word of God can transform conflict into peace, can be a source of reconciliation, peace and justice."

> 'It is in silence that we come to understand that ideologies pass away, while the truth always remains.'
> —Pope Leo XIV
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Leo also encouraged young people to seek silence amid the noise of contemporary life.

"When we seek silence, we choose what not to listen to and which noises not to let distract us," he said. "It is in silence that we come to understand that ideologies pass away, while the truth always remains."

Leo connected that invitation directly to the Eucharistic adoration that followed — and during which the entire square fell silent.

"Eucharistic adoration, which we share this evening, is the perfect place to be silent, to open our hearts, and to 'be' ourselves in the presence of the Lord," he said.

Turning to the role of Christians in contemporary society, Leo reminded the crowd that "Jesus' disciples are always people of their time, but never prisoners of a passing era."

He urged young Catholics to become missionaries in today's world, including in digital spaces, and challenged them to be "the salt of the earth and the light of the world."

A young girl reacts to a musical performance on stage as youth gather ahead of a prayer vigi

A young girl reacts to a musical performance on stage as youth gather ahead of a prayer vigil held by Pope Leo XIV at Plaza de Lima in Madrid June 6, 2026, during his apostolic journey to Spain. (OSV News/Reuters/Mohammad Salem)

Looking around the plaza before the pope's arrival, Laura Blanco, who traveled to Madrid from Burgos with a group of 15 friends, said she sees that missionary spirit already at work among young people.

Two members of her group were baptized as children but grew up in nonreligious households, she said.

"They knew we were coming, they knew the pope was coming, and they wanted to join us," Blanco said. "One of them comes to Mass with me every day now. We study together, and we end the day by going to Mass."

Blushing, she added that faith may be playing an unexpected role in another kind of discernment.

"I think he likes me. I know I like him," she said. "Seeing how important my faith is to me, I think he's trying to get to know it well enough to see if he can live with it."

In fact, after one of the young men on the stage mentioned he was a newlywed, Leo went visibly off the cuff to urge young people to "not be afraid of marriage. Do not be afraid of forming a family!"

Earlier, the pope emphasized: "Never be afraid to consider a vocation to the priesthood, religious life or other services in the church" — to much applause from the crowd.

Before Leo arrived at Plaza de Lima, pilgrims prayed the rosary's luminous mysteries, with meditations offered by young people and accompanied by sacred art from Madrid's Prado Museum.

This part of the vigil was the prelude of the city's "White and Yellow Night," during which some of Madrid's most important museums, including the Prado, opened their doors free of charge to pilgrims and visitors ahead of the pope's Mass and the Corpus Christi procession on Sunday June 7.

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As the crowd waited for Leo's arrival, giant screens replayed images from the visits of St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI to Spain. Special attention was given to the 2011 World Youth Day vigil at Madrid's Cuatro Vientos airfield, where pilgrims endured extreme heat and a violent storm before joining Benedict in Eucharistic adoration.

Organizers addressed a-then-still-absent and popemobile-riding Leo directly, urging him: "Fifteen years after World Youth Day Madrid 2011, where young people discovered that together we are stronger than the elements, today more than ever we want to welcome you, Holy Father. Inspire us as your predecessors inspired our parents, grandparents and older brothers and sisters."

Fr. José Gabriel Vera Beorlegui, spokesman for the Spanish bishops' conference, said the pope's visit comes at a moment when many people are searching for hope amid global instability.

"The visit of Pope Leo XIV to Spain is a reason for joy for the whole church," he said. "People are anguished by war, anger, violence, lies and corruption in the world. Christ is the light that will help the church in Spain, but also Spanish society, move forward."

As darkness settled over Madrid, the music and celebrations gave way to silence as hundreds of thousands of young people joined Leo in Eucharistic adoration, bringing to a close an evening that connected Spain's Catholic past with a new generation being called to shape its future.

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