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Pope Leo XIV waves to the cheering crowd after attending a midday prayer at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross and Saint Eulalia in Barcelona, Spain, Tuesday, June 9, 2026. (AP/Emilio Morenatti)

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Pope Leo XIV found himself in the midst of Spain's two classic culture wars as he landed in Barcelona on Tuesday during his weeklong visit to the country.

The U.S.-born pontiff had rubbed Barcelona's soccer fans the wrong way by saying he roots for Real Madrid instead of their beloved Barça. Barcelona's residents had already been speculating that he might make minimal use of their native Catalan during his trip to Barcelona instead of Spanish, which he speaks fluently.

He sought to disabuse them of the latter assumption soon after his arrival by speaking first in Catalan. The languages and teams have been longtime wedges between Spain's two biggest cities.

The pope visited Real Madrid's museum

The Real Madrid-Barcelona divide is one of the biggest rivalries in club football.

"The pope is for all teams, but Prevost is for Real Madrid" were the words that sealed Leo's sporting fate with many a Barça fan when he responded to a question on the papal plane en route to Spain.

Real Madrid proudly posted the video of the moment, and social media filled with comments about how the club is "the team of God."

Tomás Roncero, a popular sports commentator for the widely read Spanish sports daily AS, said in a video that "the pope can't be for Barça, because it is a sinful club ... in his heart he is of a pure and clean club like Madrid."

For many non-Madrid fans, especially those in Spain's regions with different languages and strong local identities like Catalonia, Real Madrid is associated with strong central power. Many consider it almost a pillar of the state, along with the central government and the Catholic Church.

The pope aligned himself closely with Real Madrid during events in the capital. He visited the club's museum to peruse its packed trophy case with Real Madrid president Florentino Pérez, who gave him a Madrid shirt with "Robert F. Prevost" on the back.

On Monday, thousands of Catholics packed the home venue of Real Madrid for a rally with the pope featuring dancers kicking soccer balls, while dressed in the white and yellow colors of the Holy See.

"Today the Church in Madrid has scored a great goal to always be remembered!" Leo said.

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Folks in Barcelona noticed.

"A figure as important as he is shouldn't take sides. Now that he has said that he supports Real Madrid, well, I am sorry, he has messed it up," said Eduard Modroño, an office worker and Barcelona fan. He noted that Leo and Madrid players, whose uniforms are pristine white, also dress similarly.

"He wears all white, doesn't he? Enough said," said Modroño, as he spoke outside the Sagrada Familia basilica, where the pope on Wednesday will celebrate a Mass in the major event of his stop in Spain's second city.

On Tuesday evening, Leo will preside over a vigil at Barcelona's Olympic stadium with young people. Leo will end his visit to Spain with a two-day stop in the Canary Islands.

Pope begins his homily in Barcelona with Catalan

Leo began his homily at Barcelona's cathedral with a few words in Catalan and switched between it and Spanish in his first public address in the city.

"Beloved brothers and sisters, it is with great pleasure that I start my visit holding the midday prayer at this cathedral," he said in Catalan.

Catalan and Spanish are spoken side-by-side in Catalonia, but are often weaponized politically.

Catalan, spoken by around 10 million people, was suppressed by Spain's 20th-century dictatorship under Gen. Francisco Franco, according to Catalans, who remain protective of their tongue. Its survival was an important driver of separatist sentiment during a recent push for independence that reached its peak in a failed

breakaway bid in 2017.

Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI used some Catalan when they visited Barcelona in 1982 and 2010, respectively. Spain's king speaks Catalan when he's in Catalonia, but it's rare for Spanish politicians from non-Catalan speaking regions to do so.

The pope speaking a few words in Catalan may not be enough for many residents. But some were appreciative of the gesture.

"Speaking the language of the land that welcomes you is a wonderful act of love and respect. I hope you enjoy your visit to Catalonia, my nation," Míriam Noqueras' political party, Junts, said she told the pontiff — in English — when they briefly spoke at Spain's parliament on Monday.

The archbishop of Barcelona, Juan José Omella, has tried to downplay the issue.

"The pope knew beforehand that he is coming to a country (Catalonia) where people speak a very old language that has never been lost through the centuries," Omella told reporters. "He knows this and has prepared his speeches and his homily, while keeping in mind that he can only do so much and doesn't want to end up looking silly in a language he doesn't speak."

For Modroño, the soccer fan, speaking in Catalan is more important than anything related to sports.

"It is a lack of respect not to speak entirely in Catalan," he said.

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