Vatican

Vatican News



The plane provided by King Felipe VI of Spain departs Tenerife Norte-Los Rodeos Airport June 12, 2026, carrying Pope Leo XIV to Rome at the conclusion of his apostolic journey in Spain. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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

Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain — June 12, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Leo XIV finished his seven-day trip to Spain in extremely atypical fashion: riding to Rome in the Spanish king's jet.

The last-minute twist, caused by an engine failure on the Iberia Airlines plane scheduled to take the pope back to Rome June 12, marked an unexpected ending to an otherwise carefully choreographed papal trip.

Following the pomp and circumstance of Leo's farewell ceremony in Tenerife — the Spanish island where he arrived that morning to meet with migrants and celebrate Mass with some 35,000 people — the pope and his entourage boarded the plane and appeared ready for takeoff as King Felipe VI looked on from the tarmac.

But after 28 minutes of waiting, the king surprised journalists onboard by walking across the tarmac and climbing the plane's stairs unannounced.

Related: Pope Leo directs message to migrant traffickers: 'Stop, repent'

Felipe and the pope then disembarked together and returned to the airport terminal. A photo of the pair descending the stairs, published in the Spanish press, showed them sharing a hearty laugh. They were soon followed by the cardinals and bishops traveling with the pope.

The Iberia pilot announced that strong headwinds had caused an engine failure. After the plane changed position and again attempted to start the engine, staff announced that everyone onboard would need to disembark.



Pope Leo XIV smiles during a meeting with groups assisting migrant integration in Plaza del Cristo de La Laguna in San Cristóbal de La Laguna, Tenerife, Spain, June 12, 2026. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Leo, meanwhile, escorted by the king, crossed the tarmac to a Falcon jet with "Kingdom of Spain" printed along the side in Spanish. The jet, originally intended to take Felipe back to Madrid, instead carried the pope and members of his entourage to Rome.

Felipe had traveled to Tenerife that afternoon to see the pope off. Spanish media reported that another Iberia Airlines plane was being sent from Madrid to take the king back home.

The traditional airborne press conference, during which journalists are able to ask the pope unvetted questions, did not take place.

Though highly unusual, it is not the first time the papal plane has experienced issues. St. John Paul II made an unexpected stop in Johannesburg in 1988 when bad weather threw him off course from his journey to Lesotho. He and the papal entourage ended up driving across South Africa, then under apartheid, which the pope had publicly opposed, to reach Lesotho by car. Two years earlier the Polish pope's flight was diverted to Naples due to a snowstorm in Rome.

Advertisement

This time, some of the pope's entourage, not lucky enough to be taken aboard the king's jet, along with the 80 journalists who traveled throughout Spain with the pope, were left to wait at the Tenerife airport for another Iberian Airlines plane to come from Madrid to pick them up and take them to Rome.

The pope traveled to the chain of islands off the North African coast, a tourist destination and migrant hotspot, to fulfill a long-held dream of Pope Francis to visit the Canary Islands.

In the end, Leo stayed three hours longer than planned. But even a papal itinerary drawn up to the minute did not anticipate the journey's final image: the pope leaving the island marked by migration aboard the king's jet.

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** feature series. View the full series.