Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Leo XIV blesses a child before a prayer vigil at Lluis Companys Olympic Stadium in Barcelona, Spain, Tuesday, June 9, 2026. (AP/Emilio Morenatti)

Emilio Morenatti

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Giovanna Dell'orto

View Author Profile

Associated Press

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Pope Leo XIV locked eyes with the 7-year-old boy, holding both his hands as the two smiled at one another. Captured by Associated Press chief photographer Emilio Morenatti, the moment resonated first with onlookers and then with many others around the world.

As perfectly-timed as Morenatti's photo was, what happened after made it even more captivating. Its publication and a post by Morenatti on the social platform X set off a search by internet sleuths for the boy's parents, who believed they had witnessed a miracle and likewise were trying to find Morenatti.

A photo transcends a moment

The pope shares moments with individuals all the time, especially on trips abroad, but there was something about this particular instance that stirred emotion. Here's what Morenatti, a two-time Pulitzer-winning photographer, had to say about this extraordinary photo:

"In photojournalism, a photograph should do more than document an event. It should convey a feeling, evoke an emotion and hold the viewer's attention long enough to spark a thought, even if only for a brief moment."

"I have always believed that if a photograph moves me while I am making it, there is a good chance it will move others as well," he added. "When that happens, the image transcends the simple recording of a moment and gains a deeper power."

A family prays to Gaudí

When Montse Martínez, 36, and her husband first heard of Leo's upcoming visit to the Sagrada Familia basilica, it felt like stars aligning. Such is their devotion to the Catalan architect who designed the church, Antoni Gaudí, that they named their newborn after him. For nine straight days they prayed before an image of Gaudí,

who's on the path to possible sainthood, asking him to grant them tickets to see the pope.

Their wish came true, and they were among the 40,000 faithful gathered for Leo's prayer vigil on Tuesday. A security guard noticed their baby and handed him to the pope, who gave the crying infant a blessing. The guard came back for 7-year-old Joaquim.

"He was so moved that he could only smile, he couldn't speak," Martínez said of Joaquim's few seconds with the pope in an interview with The Associated Press on Friday.

And it was at that precise moment that Morenatti snapped his photo.

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How this photo was made

This photo was only possible because Morenatti felt compelled to seek out a unique angle.

"Covering a papal visit is often frustrating for photographers. We are usually confined to positions assigned by the organizers, with little freedom to move in search of better angles," he said. On this occasion, however, he managed to get past the security cordon and join a crowd gathered along one section of the route to watch the Popemobile pass by.

"Standing on a chair among the crowd, I could see the Popemobile approaching through a sea of waving hands and flags. Then I noticed a small gap in front of me — a narrow opening through which a photograph might be possible."

"My 50–150 mm f/2 lens was already zoomed to its maximum focal length and opened to its widest aperture. I quickly checked that both faces were sharp and that the frame was clean, with everything positioned neatly beneath the windshield of the Popemobile. I pressed the shutter for a few seconds and immediately sensed that I had the photograph I had been searching for," he said. "A wave of emotion washed over me, followed by relief. The image I had imagined was finally there, safely stored on my memory card."

The search for a family, and a photographer

Morenatti didn't just publish the photo for AP clients. He also posted the image to X, asking for help finding the boy's family so he could give them a printed copy.

"They had to see this photo. And I needed to tell them how moved I was by their son," Morenatti said.

His post went viral, racking up more than half a million views and hundreds of comments. Even the Catholic Church in Barcelona chimed in, asking — in the local Catalan language — for people to assist. And one of the region's most-read newspapers wrote a story about the search.

Joaquim's parents were unaware of this campaign. But they had seen Morenatti's photo on the website of top local newspaper La Vanguardia and started working to track him down. They found his name with the help of ChatGPT and messaged him directly on Instagram. Morenatti responded and they spoke by phone, touched by the speed with which they found each other.

The family is thrilled they will soon obtain the printed image, which they will hang in their home in a village outside Barcelona.

"We haven't figured out yet where to place it, but it will be in a very special place," Martínez said, adding that she hopes it will help plant the seed of faith in her five children. Perhaps, she said, her son's short private audience with the pope could even be included in Gaudí's canonization dossier.

"For us, it's a miracle of Antoni Gaudí. It's a gift of God, who has these tender gestures of love for his children."