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Pope Leo XIV greets people gathered for the “Building Networks with the World of Culture, Art, Economy and Sport” meeting at the Movistar Arena in Madrid June 7, 2026. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Even at 35,000 feet, Pope Leo XIV felt disarmingly down to earth when kicking off his first major European trip, talking sports and weighing in on his favorite local dishes while en route to Spain.

Whether due to Leo's settling into the papacy some 13 months into the role or the missionary pope being back on familiar turf outside of Rome, Leo appeared more at ease and engaged with his environment during his June 6-12 visit to Spain than at any other point in his pontificate.

The longtime Vatican correspondent for the Spanish daily ABC wrote that Leo had traveled to Spain some 50 times before becoming bishop of Rome, beginning with a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela when the freshly ordained Augustinian Fr. Robert Prevost was just 26 years old. Today, one of his best friends, whom he met while living in an Augustinian formation house in Trujillo, Peru, still lives and works in Spain.

Suffice to say, Leo's seven days in Spain were, in many regards, a homecoming. And the pope's ease manifested itself both in the force and fluidity of his first events.

In the Spanish Royal Palace in Madrid, the pope railed against political division before the leaders of one of Europe's most polarized nations without skipping a beat, but it was that evening before a half million young people that Leo looked firmly at ease.

During the type of papal event that can easily become dry and overly scripted, Leo appeared genuinely plugged in. He even riffed off one of the prepared testimonies, going off script to congratulate a participant on his recent marriage before turning to the crowd to draw huge cheers.

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"I have seen other couples here who are getting married as well: Congratulations and best wishes!" Leo said. "As I said before, do not be afraid to consider a vocation — marriage is also a vocation. Do not be afraid of marriage and starting a family!"

The following day, Leo drew the largest crowd of his pontificate for Mass and a eucharistic procession in the center of Madrid. And the next evening, in the city's roaring Santiago Bernabéu soccer stadium, the pope ventured into the kind of off-the-cuff comment that would have been difficult to imagine from the mild-mannered pontiff of a year ago.

Before delivering his speech to Madrid's diocesan community in the packed, 80,000-seat stadium, Leo joked in a moment that quickly went viral in Spain: "For a soccer player, scoring a goal in this stadium is something that leaves a lasting impression for life."

Then, turning to Cardinal José Cobo Cano of Madrid, Leo added, "Today, the church of Madrid scored a spectacular goal (*un golazo*!) that will go down in history."

For Leo, who cracks jokes in private but typically reads his speeches to the letter at large events, the moment revealed a newfound public comfort for the pope.

His relaxed mood manifested in more intimate moments, too. Leo joked with Spanish bishops over lunch about how AI models still think Pope Francis is pope, and the organizers of the trip said the pope stopped to bless more than 100 babies over the course of his two-day visit to Barcelona.



Pope Leo XIV blesses a child as he arrives to attend a prayer vigil at the Lluis Companys Olympic Stadium, during his apostolic journey, in Barcelona, Spain, June 9, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Yara Nardi)

Even in the Canary Islands, where the plight of migration was the leg's sober theme, Leo humored a migrant by performing the "6-7" meme hand gesture on stage during his meeting with migrants, to the delight of the audience.

And throughout the highly-anticipated papal visit to Spain, the first in 15 years, Leo appeared well-equipped to receive the full "papal treatment." Even during his flights within the country, the pope was serenaded by a specially produced soundtrack recorded by the boys' choir of the Royal Monastery of El Escorial, directed by Augustinian fathers.

Where his predecessor, Francis, often appeared allergic to the signs of privilege and reverence attached to the papal office (he famously discouraged people from kissing his ring when meeting them), Leo seemed willing to receive them and even revel in them to the delight of those offering.

Nowhere was that clearer than in Barcelona, where Leo became the principal spectator of an ornate light show for the inauguration of the Basilica of the Sagrada Família's tallest tower. The display, complete with fireworks and drones, depicted the basilica's architect, Antoni Gaudí, looking down upon his unfinished masterpiece as the Tower of Jesus Christ was unveiled. The pope appeared to relish the celebration.



Pope Leo XIV and Spain's King Felipe VI leave the plane on which the pope was due to depart following a delay for maintenance issues, at Tenerife Norte-Ciudad de La Laguna Airport, Canary Islands, Spain, June 12, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Borja Suarez)

At home, Leo seems to have few qualms about accepting some of the privileges and rituals that come with the office.

The papal summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, effectively set aside by Francis, has become something more like a papal retreat since Leo began spending Tuesdays

there year-round. And at the Vatican, he personally attended the concert for the poor, which draws world-famous musicians to perform for people in need at Rome — an event Francis systematically skipped.

Even the trip's most unexpected twist seemed to fit the looser mood and pageantry.

After an engine failure grounded the Iberia Airlines flight scheduled to return Leo to Rome, the pope ended up hitching a ride on the Spanish king's plane. A photo published in the Spanish press showed Leo and King Felipe VI sharing a hearty laugh as they descended from the inoperative aircraft.

In that regard, Leo is certainly different from his predecessor, whom it would be difficult to imagine accepting the trappings of royal hospitality.

But the contrast between the spectacle surrounding Leo's visit and the messages he touted throughout the trip — advocating for the poor, migrants and the marginalized — shows how Leo can step into the highest halls of power (in this case the Spanish parliament) and still preach on behalf of the oppressed.

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