News



Pope Leo XIV receives the 2026 Liberty Medal from the National Constitution Center from the center's Interim President and CEO Vince Stango and Chair Mike George during a Vatican ceremony on April 30. (Courtesy of the National Constitution Center)



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July 1, 2026

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On the eve of the 250th anniversary of American independence, Pope Leo XIV will be honored as the 2026 Liberty Medal recipient in a National Constitution Center ceremony that organizers say will celebrate the importance of religious liberty, freedom of conscience and human dignity.

The pontiff will address the audience live from the Vatican during a public event scheduled for 10:45 a.m. to noon EST July 3 on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, where more than 1,000 attendees are expected to gather in the shadow of Independence Hall. The ceremony will also be livestreamed globally.

The Liberty Medal, awarded annually by the National Constitution Center, honors individuals whose work has advanced liberty around the world. Previous recipients have included prominent global leaders, human rights advocates, and public servants recognized for promoting freedom, democracy and justice.

This year's award recognizes Leo for his commitment to advancing religious liberty and freedom of conscience and expression, principles protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

The pope, who received the medal in person during a separate Vatican ceremony on April 30, connected the award to the founding ideals of the United States.

"I would just like to recall the words signed by the Founding Fathers of the nation 250 years ago in Philadelphia, in the Declaration of Independence, when they said that we hold these truths to be self-evident … that all men have received fundamental rights from our creator," he said. "And they include life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

"May those values continue to inspire us in the United States and throughout the world, and together hopefully we can all work that those freedoms will indeed be a part of the lives of all people everywhere."



The National Constitution Center's Kenneth C. Griffin Great Hall Overlook features flags representing each U.S. state in order of when they joined the Union. (Courtesy of the National Constitution Center)

For organizers, the pope's remarks reflected the broader significance of this year's ceremony, which coincides with a milestone in American history.

"It was a remarkable, once in a lifetime experience," Vince Stango, interim president and CEO of the National Constitution Center said of the April delegation that traveled to the Vatican to present the award.

"I was struck by the fact that we are honoring him for his lifelong commitment to religious liberty and freedom of conscience," Stango said. "These are American ideals, sure, but they're global ideals, global issues as well."

The July 3 ceremony is expected to feature a diverse group of religious and civic leaders, reflecting the interfaith dimension of the event. Scheduled participants include Archbishop Nelson Pérez of Philadelphia, Imam Quaiser Abdullah, Rabbi Jill Maderer, the Rev. Carolyn Cavaness and the Rev. Luis Cortés Jr., among others.

"We've assembled this wonderful collection of interfaith leaders from Philadelphia," Stango said. "Just that living expression of religious liberty of an interfaith celebration is coming together really beautifully."

The setting is expected to reinforce the symbolism. The center sits directly across from Independence Hall, where both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution have deep historical roots. "The symmetry between the founding of the country and the creation of the Constitution will be on full display," Stango said.

For church leaders in Philadelphia, the award represents both recognition of Leo's leadership and an opportunity for reflection on the role of faith in public life.

Philadelphia's Auxiliary Bishop Christopher Cooke said he expects Leo to focus on religious freedom as a foundation of a healthy society and to emphasize the dignity of every human person.

"Pope Leo, first of all, is looking at religious freedom as being really the cornerstone of a society," Cooke told NCR. He pointed to the pope's recent encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, which emphasizes respect for human dignity in an era increasingly shaped by technology and social change.

"I think our country is actually hungering for love," Cooke said. "Our country is hungering for what it means to be embraced by God."

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Many people are searching for reassurance that their worth is not tied to achievement or productivity, he added.

"I think our country is hungering for a message that says, yes, you matter, not because of what you do, because of what you produce, but because of who you are," Cooke said. That message, he said, will resonate far beyond the U.S.

Julie Silverbrook, the center's chief content and learning officer, said she hopes "people walk away from the event feeling inspired by the examples that are uplifted through the remarks throughout the ceremony, and curious to explore that for themselves personally."

The event is intended as both a celebration of a distinguished honoree and an invitation to revisit the principles that shaped the nation.

"We want people to return to those founding principles that animated the founders of this country," Stango said. "If we can step back from the news and the headlines and all the things that are polarizing and distract(ing) us and remind ourselves of the commonality that we have as American citizens and as global citizens, I believe that the ceremony will be a wonderful celebration of those ideals."

This story appears in the **USA 250** feature series. View the full series.