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Pope Leo XIV poses for a photo with two young boys at a lunch with vulnerable people from tl

Pope Leo XIV poses for a photo with two young boys at a lunch with vulnerable people from the Diocese of Rome at Borgo Laudato Si, in the pontifical gardens of Castel Gandolfo, Italy, July 11, 2026. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Simone Risoluti)

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Under the Italian sun of Lake Albano and the shade of Castel Gandolfo's Borgo Laudato Si' trees, Pope Leo XIV enjoyed lunch with people experiencing social vulnerability.

About 200 people from the Diocese of Rome took part in the event on July 11. "Lunch with the Pope" was "a day of welcome and fraternity" within the Pontifical Gardens of Castel Gandolfo, the Vatican's Laudato Si' Center for Higher Education said in a statement.

Before the guests, including nearly 40 children, enjoyed the guided tour through the gardens, the day began with Mass celebrated by Cardinal Fabio Baggio, general director of the Laudato Si' Center for Higher Education, and concelebrated by

Archbishop Luis Marín de San Martín, prefect of the Dicastery for the Service of Charity.

"I came without a prepared speech, but I did come with hunger — hunger for justice, hunger for genuine charity, hunger for a Church that truly knows how to open its doors, to welcome and receive everyone; where there is love for all and no one is an enemy, where all of us know how to live reconciliation, forgiveness and peace," Leo said, welcoming those present, as reported by Vatican News.

Leo recalled that one of the pope's titles is the "Pontiff — a builder of bridges."

"And today we too want to build a bridge with all of you, with your families, and with the society in which we want to live — a society marked by justice, where the causes of poverty can be eliminated and where the causes of the injustices that still exist in our world can be overcome," Leo said.

"This," he said, "is the Church we want to be," Vatican News reported.

Only a few months after taking upon the See of Peter, Leo first met with people experiencing vulnerability from the Diocese of Albano. That meeting on Aug. 17, 2025, gave birth to an annual tradition of encounters with the underprivileged.

"Each year, a diocese will be invited to involve people living in situations of poverty, refugees, migrants, and others experiencing social vulnerability," to let them experience " the beauty of creation" and create an "opportunity to meet the Holy Father," the Laudato Si' Center said.

Pope Leo XIV has lunch with vulnerable people from the Diocese of Rome at Borgo Laudato Si

Pope Leo XIV has lunch with vulnerable people from the Diocese of Rome at Borgo Laudato Si, in the pontifical gardens of Castel Gandolfo, Italy, July 11, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Matteo Minnella)

Baggio said in the July 7 press release that "Borgo Laudato si' was created to show that the care of creation and the care of the human person are one and the same mission."

"After Lampedusa, this day represents a new step in Pope Leo XIV's journey towards the social peripheries of our time," the cardinal said, referencing Leo's visit July 4 to

an Italian island that serves as both a place of the hope of a new life and of the tragedy of those that never made it through the sea to Europe.

"At Borgo Laudato si', the Holy Father meets people experiencing vulnerability, reaffirming that the Church is called to inhabit the places where human dignity calls for listening, closeness and hope," Baggio said.

The encounter embodies the church's service to the poor, Marín, papal almoner, emphasized.

"The Holy Father's choice confirms that charity consists of closeness, encounter and sharing. When the Church places the most vulnerable people at the center, it makes the Gospel visible and bears witness that no one is on the margins of God's heart," he said in the July 7 statement.

Leo expressed his gratitude to those that organized the July 11 gathering, which included dozens of organizations that on a daily basis assist people experiencing vulnerability.

"Whenever we come together, whenever we share this spirit of encounter around the same table — the one table where Jesus is also present among us," Leo said, as reported by Vatican News.

"We are truly building a different world, a world of hope, a world that is a light in the midst of our own," he added.

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The pontiff urged that in a world fractured by "violence, hatred and discrimination," communities need to "work together and strive always to be this kind of Church: a Church of justice, peace and love," praying that in families of those that gathered in Castel Gandolfo's picturesque setting people "find peace, forgiveness and reconciliation."

Cardinal Baldassare Reina, vicar general for the Diocese of Rome, said in the July 7 statement that the organizers "wanted the protagonists of this day to be people who are accompanied every day by parishes, Caritas, and the many ecclesial and social organizations of the Diocese of Rome," adding that "the encounter with the Holy

Father restores centrality to those who too often remain on the margins and calls the entire Christian community to the responsibility of welcome."

Borgo Laudato si' extended "their heartfelt thanks" to Ristorante L'Isola della Pizza in Rome, which "generously offered the lunch," and to Bar Al Duomo in Albano Laziale, "which provided the welcome breakfast, contributing through their generosity to the success of the day."

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