



Pope Leo XIV speaks to journalists aboard the papal flight from Rome to Paris Sept. 25, 2026, at the start of his apostolic journey to France and visit to UNESCO.
(CNS/Lola Gomez)



by Camillo Barone

NCR staff reporter

[View Author Profile](#)
cbarone@ncronline.org

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Greeting journalists on his flight to France on Friday, Pope Leo XIV was asked about the recent decision by President Donald Trump to ban certain news organizations from the White House, and the pope used the question as an opportunity to welcome the Vatican press corps.

"I'm very happy that, here, you are all welcome," Leo [responded to CNN](#) Vatican correspondent Christopher Lamb. Along with Politico and MSNOW, CNN was also banned from the White House, before [a federal judge](#) intervened. "With coverage, I think it's very important that we have it all the way around for everyone."

Leo walked through the press section during the roughly two-hour flight from Rome to Paris, stopping for brief conversations with journalists from different countries and news organizations. The informal exchange of brief conversations and gifts — some of which reporters later shared in videos on social media — came before the pope landed at Paris-Orly for the first full papal visit to France since [Benedict XVI's trip in 2008](#).

"I travel in France, as elsewhere in the world, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, wishing to proclaim peace, the peace of Christ throughout the world," Leo [told](#) journalists aboard the aircraft. He said the visit would touch on "several very important subjects."

Immigration also surfaced during the pope's walk through the cabin.

Asked about the recent immigration emergency in Ceuta, the Spanish enclave on the North African coast, Leo [said](#) he had been following the situation closely.

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"I have followed it from the first day," the pope said. "It is a crisis that has causes of different kinds behind it. We have to look for how to respond in order to avoid this

type of emergency. It really was a humanitarian crisis."

The subject carries particular significance for Leo, whose June [visit to Spain](#) included encounters with migrants and a [stop in the Canary Islands](#), one of the principal entry points into Europe for people making dangerous sea crossings from Africa.

But the pope's exchanges aboard the flight were not limited just to political and humanitarian crises.

Asked about signs of a Catholic revival in France — including increasing numbers of people seeking baptism — Leo [welcomed](#) what he described as a growing "spiritual thirst" in the country.

The phrase echoes language used by French church leaders ahead of the visit. Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline of Marseille, president of the French bishops' conference and a key figure behind the invitation to Leo, has spoken of a "great spiritual thirst" in France, particularly among young people. French bishops have pointed to rising interest in Catholicism and unusually large registration numbers for events during the papal visit.

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The flight also offered a more personal glimpse of Leo XIV when OSV News' Courtney Mares [asked](#) him about Blessed Fulton Sheen, the celebrated American television evangelist who had been [beatified in St. Louis](#) the previous day. Leo recalled watching Sheen's television programs with his family as a child in the Chicago area.

"We watched him as a family," the pope said, describing the broadcasts as a way of spending time together while listening to "the truths" and teachings that Sheen communicated in an enthusiastic and lively way. "The message that he had was something that really came home to people and I think helped us as a family," Leo added, before joking about his age. "I'm that old."

Leo also showed his sense of humor when the conversation turned to his alma mater, Villanova University. Justin McLellan, Vatican correspondent at the National Catholic Reporter, [asked](#) him about the Villanova-Notre Dame basketball games scheduled to be played in Rome in November. The pope, a Villanova graduate and well-known supporter of the university, appeared confident about which side would have the louder backing.

"They tell me that the people coming to the match, 90% are Villanova and 10% Notre Dame," Leo joked. "So the voice of the people of God will be very strong on the Villanova side."

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Franca Giansoldati, Vatican correspondent for the Italian daily Il Messaggero, [asked](#) Leo, "Are you a happy person?"

"Happy, yes, I think so," the pope replied. "Despite the difficulties, though, I find [happiness] in faith," Leo [said](#). "I am happy with a choice I made many years ago, which I renew every time. But I tell myself: Following Jesus is the happiest thing in life."

"Why? Do you see me sad?" he then snapped with a smile, making people around him laugh.

The pope's relaxed conversations with reporters came after he opened his visit to the press cabin by [apologizing](#) for what had happened at the end of his June trip to Spain. On the return journey to Rome, a technical problem with the aircraft left the journalists traveling with him behind while Leo returned [aboard a plane offered by Spain's King Felipe VI](#).

Leo told the journalists Friday that he wanted to apologize personally, even though he stressed that he had had nothing to do with the decision. The episode had also deprived reporters of the customary papal news conference on the return flight.

This story appears in the **Pope Leo in France** feature series. [View the full series](#).