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Pope Leo XIV addresses the faithful during vespers at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris Sept. 25

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by Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

[View Author Profile](#)

jmclellan@ncronline.org

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Pope Francis caused a stir in France when he decided to skip the inauguration of the restored Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris and instead visit the French island of Corsica [for a day trip](#).

Two years later, his successor preached the late pope's vision of an open, welcoming church in the Parisian cathedral during its first papal visit since flames swallowed the church's iconic spire in 2019.

[Notre Dame](#), the Gothic cathedral completed in the 14th century, is owned by the French government and operated by the Catholic Church. Its reconstruction was funded by public, private and church funds, but some Catholics had criticized the

2024 inauguration as a PR stunt for the French government; it was attended by government leaders and foreign dignitaries, including first lady Jill Biden and then-President-elect Donald Trump.

Traces of that sentiment remain: France's leading newspaper, Le Monde, [dubbed](#) Emmanuel Macron the "papophile" president for repeatedly seeking public occasions to show his closeness to the popes to improve his public image over his more than nine years in office.

Ahead of Leo's current trip, the Catholic French daily La Croix reported Macron [had requested](#) to privately show the pope the inside the cathedral, but that the request was turned down by the Vatican to maintain the event's pastoral nature and not turn it into a state affair.

Yet after Leo entered the vast cathedral today (Sept. 25) immersed in the church's pounding organ music, he told Paris' Catholic community — some 2,500 inside with another roughly 5,000 watching on screens outdoors — that the reconstruction of Notre Dame offered an encounter "that has expanded horizons of welcome and participation beyond the boundaries of ecclesial affiliation."

"Dear bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, seminarians of France, let yourselves be inspired by what has happened here!" he said. "Make the vision of *Evangelii Gaudium* your priority, namely the missionary conversion which Pope Francis spoke of in his first apostolic exhortation."

"Confidently value the missionary presence of the lay faithful, who are the living front line of the church at the crossroads of everyday life," the pope urged.

Greeting the pope at Notre Dame, Archbishop Laurent Ulrich of Paris recalled that when he had invited Leo to the French capital a year ago, "you told me you had the desire to see Notre Dame."

The archbishop's comment reflected a notable difference between Leo and his predecessor: Whereas Francis eschewed Catholicism's traditional European hubs, Leo has been eager to seek them out. Two of his four days in France will be spent visiting the Marian shrine at Lourdes, which draws some 3 million pilgrims each year.

But even if they have different styles, Leo has taken up Francis' efforts to make the church more welcoming with full force.

After touring the interior of the historic church, the pope said that "like the cathedrals of old, the church is a place of welcome, respect, revelation and meaning for everyone."

"At the heart of the city, the open cathedral is a sign of a community that praises the Lord and lives hospitality not as an occasional gesture, but as the very form of its existence," he said, "so that all may feel at home, no longer dominated or marginalized in a changing world."

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