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Pope Leo XIV looks on as Matteo Bruni, head of the Vatican press hall, speaks to journalists at

Pope Leo XIV looks on as Matteo Bruni, head of the Vatican press hall, 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)

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Might a helping hand from Pope Leo XIV partly explain the Chicago White Sox's improbable return to the playoffs?

"No comment," the pontiff replied with a beaming smile when a reporter on his plane to France asked whether the Sept. 24 surprise by the long-suffering baseball team was miraculous and "Do you have anything to do with that?"

But the Chicago-born and raised lifelong fan of the White Sox left no doubt that he was thrilled, by adding: "Great things happen in Chicago."

The pontiff's oh-so-diplomatic answer was perhaps because he's had experience of how perceived papal rooting for one team or another can land him in hot water.

In June, he said "the pope is for all teams" but rubbed soccer fans in Barcelona the wrong way by adding that he personally roots for Real Madrid, inserting himself into

one of the biggest rivalries in club football.

Real Madrid proudly posted the video of the moment, and social media filled with comments about how the club is "the team of God."

Again being careful not to overtly take sides, the pontiff also showed on the papal plane that he keeps a keen eye on basketball, too.

In response to another question, Leo said that "the voice of the people of God" will be cheering loudly for Villanova University — where he studied mathematics in the 1970s — when his alma mater and Notre Dame play a men's and women's season-opening basketball doubleheader in Rome on Nov. 1.

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

The Catholic schools are promoting the matchup as a celebration of their shared mission and heritage.

Long before he became the first pope from the United States, Robert Prevost graduated in 1977 with a Bachelor of Science in mathematics from the Augustinian school near Philadelphia.

The 71-year-old pontiff's sporting interests extend to tennis, too.

"I consider myself quite the amateur tennis player," he said in a 2023 interview with the Augustinian Order, although the newly made cardinal added that his church responsibilities weren't leaving him much time to get out on court.

As pontiff, Leo likes to spend Mondays and Tuesdays at the papal retreat in Castel Gandolfo in the hills outside Rome — where he plays tennis with his secretary, Monsignor Edgard Iván Rimaycuna Inga, and goes swimming and horseback riding, too.

Last year, Leo granted a Vatican audience to top-ranked tennis player Jannik Sinner. But he declined Sinner's offer of a quick volley.

The pope looked around at the antiques and said, "Better not."

[Associated Press writer Nicole Winfield in Paris contributed to this story.]

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