

[Vatican](#)

[Vatican News](#)

Pope Leo XIV greets young people during a prayer vigil at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis,

Pope Leo XIV greets young people during a prayer vigil at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis, France, Sept. 25, 2026, as part of the pope's four-day apostolic journey to France. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Simone Risoluti)



by Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

[View Author Profile](#)

jmclellan@ncronline.org

Follow on Twitter at [@m/McLellan Js](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

Paris — September 26, 2026

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Even Pope Leo XIV said he was "struck" by the rise of Catholic converts in France, a surprise phenomenon that in part motivated the U.S.-born pope's four-day visit to the country once considered "the eldest daughter of the church" but more recently associated with the decline of religious affiliation across the West.

Although the number of infant baptisms continues to slide in historically Catholic France, a [rise](#) in adults seeking to join the church has led church officials, including the pope, to look to the country famous for its policy state-sanctioned *laïcité*, or secularism, as a harbinger of a larger Catholic revival.

Several people who work with new converts in France [told](#) the National Catholic Reporter ahead of the pope's trip that among the factors contributing to the surge are a newfound appreciation for the country's Christian heritage, a sense of disillusionment with modern society and an increased desire for a sense of community.

Yet meeting on Saturday (Sept. 26) with new Catholics and people preparing to enter the church, Leo said that the rise of converts in France, a country "far surpasses statistical and sociological analysis" and "contradicts every defeatist attitude" about the future of the church.

Young people attend a prayer vigil at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis, France, Sept. 25, 2026.

Young people attend a prayer vigil at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis, France, Sept. 25, 2026, during Pope Leo XIV's four-day apostolic journey to France. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Matteo Pernaselci)

That such a meeting made the pope's tight agenda in Paris was itself a papal nod to the rise in Catholic converts throughout the French church, which has seen record numbers of people seeking to join its ranks each year since 2022, with adults between 18 to 25 driving much of the uptick.

In a show of the French church's vibrancy, Leo presided over a youth vigil outside Paris in France's largest sporting stadium the night prior, telling some 80,000 young people to shun empty relationships and pursue "a conversion that gives full meaning to our lives."

Though international pop star Céline Dion was touring through Paris the same nights as the pope, Leo drew a bigger crowd and a fervor tantamount to that of a rockstar at the Stade de France, inciting passionate cheers and more than a few teary eyes from the spectators.

A show, complete with fireworks, sent costumed actors around the stadium depicting France's Catholic saints throughout history, such as Sts. Vincent de Paul and Thérèse of Lisieux. But Leo told the young people present, "You are the saints of France!"



Elisabeth de Petiville and Benoit-Kolbe de Dieuleveult, students in Paris, attend a prayer vigil presided over by Pope Leo XIV in Saint-Denis, France, Sept. 25, 2026. (NCR photo/Justin McLellan)

For many young Catholics, the pope's visit was a validation of the current cultural shift around Catholicism in France.

The pope's visit sent a message to the country's young Catholics "to not hesitate to say 'yes, I am Catholic' and to show one's faith rather than hide it away," said Elisabeth de Petiville, a 21-year-old student in Paris who attended the vigil. "What we have is really beautiful, so why not share it with others?"

Louis-Gonzague Deyrieux, a 28-year-old student at the Catholic seminary of Paris, said that throughout France young people are "disappointed by the spiritual propositions in France and by the world, and so they are entering the church."



Louis-Gonzague Deyrieux, a 28-year-old student at the Catholic seminary of Paris, poses for a photo at a prayer vigil presided over by Pope Leo XIV in Saint-Denis, France, Sept. 25, 2026. (NCR photo/Justin McLellan)

But counter to the narrative anecdotally spread in the United States that young people are being drawn particularly to a more traditional form of Catholicism, "in France, there are traditional Masses and charismatic Masses, there are a lot of options, and so young people are looking, and they aren't judging, and they're choosing where they find Jesus," Deyrieux told NCR.

At the Catholic University of Paris Sept. 26, Leo said that through the new Catholics entering the church, "the community of believers can renew its own journey of faith and experience the joy of the Gospel in a new way."

During the meeting, the pope also received the [working document](#) from the Paris region's ecclesial assembly — a consultative process of clergy and lay Catholics meant to study the question of how the church should reckon with its new Catholics.

Advertisement

Leo, however had his own recommendations, calling for the church to create a more welcoming environment, better form catechists and accompany new Catholics even after they join the church to avoid the "post-baptismal emptiness" of feeling alone once they complete their initial formation courses.

"We must respect each person's pace, proceeding gradually and carefully with fraternal accompaniment," he said.

"Looking at you, dear catechumens and newly baptized persons, I see not only the fruits of the Holy Spirit, who set you on this path, but also the promise of fruitfulness for the Church in France," the pope continued. "In turn, be missionaries of the Gospel in this society!"

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

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