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Pope Leo XIV travels in the popemobile on the Champs-Élysées near the Arc de Triomphe to c

Pope Leo XIV travels in the popemobile on the Champs-Élysées near the Arc de Triomphe to celebrate an open-air Mass at the Place de la Concorde during his four-day apostolic journey to France, Sept. 26, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Benoit Tessier)



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Paris — September 26, 2026

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The more than mile-long Champs-Élysées boulevard was filled end-to-end with enthusiastic crowds — over 700,000 people — jockeying to get a glimpse of Pope Leo XIV on his way to celebrate Mass in Paris.

In secular France, the head of the Catholic Church has made a splash. Such a large turnout Sept. 26, the second of his four days in the country, caught even the local authorities by surprise; the Archdiocese of Paris had [announced](#) that the police had opened two overflow sites to accommodate the larger-than-expected crowds.

And in his first public Mass in France, where the church is reconciling its declining numbers with a sudden surge of interest among young adults, the pope urged French to recall its Christian heritage to satisfy the "thirst for meaning, for truth and fulfilment" that exists in the human heart.

"Seeing you gathered here, my brothers and sisters, heirs to France's long and beautiful history of faith, I say to you: drink from the source that is the pierced heart of Jesus," he said at the outdoor Mass at Place de la Concorde. "Yes, you thirst for God, for life, for truth, for unity, for peace, for communion and for happiness. You long to rediscover a horizon filled with light and to build a renewed nation upon roots nourished by faith."

Leo, who himself has ancestral roots in France, recalled the many Catholic saints who had come from France but directed a message to the young people present: "You are today's church."

And to those seeking to join the church and new Catholics, whose numbers have increased throughout France each year since 2022, the pope said to "bear witness to those around you to the journey you are making, and inspire them to ask themselves questions as well."

More than 700,000 people attended an open-air Mass led by Pope Leo XIV during his four-day

More than 700,000 people attended an open-air Mass led by Pope Leo XIV during his four-day apostolic journey to France at the Place de la Concorde in Paris, Sept. 26, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Remo Casilli)

The scale of Leo's Mass sent a powerful message about the vibrancy of Catholicism in a country that has thought to cast off its religious roots.

The 2008 Mass celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI in Paris was attended by some 250,000 people, less than half of those at Leo's Mass. And the last pope to ride down the Champs-Élysées was St. John Paul II in 1980, accompanied by French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing as part of a state visit and not as part of a Mass.

While Leo was welcomed to France by President Emmanuel Macron, the French president will not attend any of the three public Masses the pope will celebrate in the country. Yet the far-right presidential hopeful, Marine Le Pen, attended Leo's Mass in Paris.

For Philippe Baptiste, a Paris native, part of the mass turnout to see the pope could be attributed to the figure of Leo himself: "He is a pope who is young, 71, and he moves the young people forward; he is calm, a good-listener and he has very precise ideas and is able to express them clearly and in an engaging way — all the young people and the crowds here show that."

Pope Leo XIV stands in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus as he celebrates an

Pope Leo XIV stands in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus as he celebrates an open-air Mass at the Place de la Concorde in Paris during his four-day apostolic journey to France, Sept. 26, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Sarah Meyssonier)

Alexandre Lehir, 20, said that young French people are being drawn to Christianity in part due to the uncertainty they feel around the state of the world.

"I think that a lot of people feel anxiety of what is happening in the world, and I think that the Christian faith, God, can give them a response to all of that, a certain sense of hope."

From Paris, the pope will continue to underscore the Catholic roots of France by visiting Lourdes — the Marian shrine visited by some 3 million pilgrims each year and where Pope Francis never traveled. He will then travel to Metz, near the French border, where he will speak on his vision of Europe.

But the pope closed the Paris leg of his trip with enthusiasm, praying that faith and charity "blossom throughout France."

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