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Pope Leo XIV thanks the faithful during his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at The Vatican, Wednesday, Oct. 21, 2026. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

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Rome — October 21, 2026

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An hour after Robert Prevost was elected as the [first American pope](#), Villanova's athletic director texted sports travel expert John Anthony with the idea.

"It just said, '[Villanova](#) - [Notre Dame](#). Basketball game in [Vatican City](#)?' " Anthony said, recounting how he then responded to Eric Roedl a moment later "with all caps, 'YES. I'M SERIOUS. WE'RE GOING TO DO THIS.'"

Now, 1 ½ years later, the idea is about to become reality: the Villanova and Notre Dame men's and women's teams will meet in a [doubleheader in Rome](#) — not quite Vatican City, but close enough — on Nov. 1 that will mark the start of the college basketball season.

The [Catholic universities](#) are promoting the games as a celebration of their shared mission and heritage. The event has been dubbed the Eternal City Tip-Off and there will be a Vatican component: Villanova alumnus Pope Leo XIV is scheduled — health permitting — to hold a private audience Oct. 31 with all four teams and their traveling fans. A total of about 7,000 people are expected in the Paul VI audience hall inside the Vatican.

"He will know who they (the players) are. He's a true, blue Villanovan," said the Rev. Rob Hagan, Villanova's longtime team chaplain, adding that Leo used to attend Wildcats games at the Palestra, the Philadelphia arena known as "The Cathedral of College Basketball."

"And of course he's not unfamiliar with Notre Dame and their history and legacy," Hagan added. "I think he'll be very dialed in and excited to be part of it."

The plans involving the pope were made before the [71-year-old Leo had the lower lobe of his right lung removed](#) last week and was diagnosed with [lung cancer](#). Hagan said: "We're rooting for him."

[Leo graduated in 1977 with a Bachelor of Science in mathematics from Villanova](#), the Augustinian school near Philadelphia. He was born in Chicago — not all that far from Notre Dame, which is located in South Bend, Indiana.

"To have a pope who grew up an hour and a half from Notre Dame, who went to Villanova, who is [an open sports fan](#), who consistently speaks about uniting the world and the ability of sports to bring people together — it's just a unifying occasion that sport uniquely can do," added Anthony, who has also organized [college football](#)

[games in Ireland](#) for years.

Papal hyperbole?

Asked about the upcoming games on the papal plane during a recent trip to France, [Leo said](#), "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."

It turns out Leo may have received some inflated numbers.

"Yes, the turnout among the fans has been phenomenal. It will be a full arena. It's safe to say there will be more Villanova fans than Notre Dame, but no, it won't be anywhere near nine to one," Anthony said.

The games will be played at the 11,000-seat Palazzo dello Sport, where Cassius Clay — before he became [Muhammad Ali](#) — boxed to a gold medal during the 1960 Rome Olympics.

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Pope Leo unlikely to attend the games

While the arena is only about a half-hour drive from the Vatican, the pope is not expected to attend the games.

Popes regularly go to sports stadiums when they are travelling internationally, but in those cases the pope is presiding over a papal event: A Mass, a youth vigil or some other event tied to his mission as Christ's vicar on Earth. He doesn't go as a spectator, but rather as the chief celebrant.

As a result, the pope's attendance at a basketball game, even a season opener featuring his alma mater, seems unlikely — especially considering his health condition. Still, organizers are preparing for the possibility that Leo shows up.

"He can throw up the ball for the tip off. He can do whatever he wants and we will say, 'Thank you,'" Anthony said. "We certainly have made contingency plans."

The Vatican didn't immediately respond when asked if Leo would attend the games. Nov. 1 is a Sunday and a major Catholic holiday — All Saints' Day — which usually involves a papal Mass and noontime prayer at the Vatican. The men's game starts at 3:30 p.m. local (9:30 a.m. ET) and the women's game starts at 6 p.m. local (noon ET).

There should be a decent contingent of American cardinals and archbishops at the games. Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson Perez will celebrate a private mass for traveling fans in St. Peter's Basilica the day before the games.

The 'Italian Wemby' and a top WNBA prospect

The men's game will mark a Villanova debut on home soil for [7-foot-3 freshman center Luigi Suigo](#), a 19-year-old Italian who is a projected NBA draft lottery pick.

Organizers cut off ticket sales in the U.S. to hold some space in the arena for local fans hoping to see Suigo, who has been nicknamed the "Italian Wemby" after San Antonio Spurs star Victor Wembanyama, who is French.

In the women's game, the main attraction will be [Notre Dame guard Hannah Hidalgo](#), last season's Naismith national defensive player of the year and a top WNBA prospect.

Hidalgo averaged 25.3 points last season and is the only major conference player this century to record 2,000 points, 500 rebounds, 400 assists and 400 steals prior to the conclusion of their junior season.

"She plays with a motor that I don't know we've ever seen before — just non-stop energy," said Anthony, a Notre Dame alum.

Global boom in sports tourism

The Michigan football team visited the Vatican in 2017, with then-coach Jim Harbaugh giving Pope Francis [a personalized winged helmet](#) complete with the pope's name and number (226) and a pair of size 11 Jordan Brand sneakers.

While there have been high-level college basketball games in Europe before — [Kentucky beat Michigan in London in 2022](#); plus the Armed Forces Classic in Germany — organizers for this event are taking it to a new level.

"For instance, we had the court constructed in the U.S. and it went over by sea to Italy," Anthony said. "This is a very high-quality production in every way. From exterior signage to interior hospitality spaces to scoreboards and shot clocks and video boards."

With 7,000 traveling fans spending \$3,000 each, Anthony estimated that the event will inject \$21 million into the Italian economy.

Anthony is the executive vice president of On Location, a global leader in sports hospitality that arranges ticket packages for the Super Bowl. On Location also worked on the Milan Cortina Olympics and the soccer World Cup this year.

"We're living in the center of this sports tourism global boom," he said. "This is the biggest year in the history of that industry."

Pushing the NFL out of the way

In order to televise the men's game — Bill Raftery will be the analyst — Fox is eliminating one of its NFL pregame shows that Sunday. The women's game will be shown on FS1.

Tip-off for the men's game (at 9:30 a.m. ET) comes when churchgoers in much of the U.S. usually attend Sunday mass.

Maybe Pope Leo will have something to say about that.