



Students walk past an image of Pope Leo XIV at Villanova University in Villanova, Pa., Wednesday, Oct. 21, 2026. (AP/Matt Rourke)

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Villanova, Pa. — October 27, 2026

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At Villanova University, all roads — or at least many of them — seem to lead to Rome, thanks to famed alumnus [Pope Leo XIV](#) and the school's growing ties to the Vatican. Even its vaunted basketball program is [getting in on the act](#).

"We certainly have a bigger footprint there now than we used to," said Fr. Peter Donohue, Villanova's president. "People do know who we are, just because it's the pope's school."

The pope graduated from Villanova with a degree in mathematics in 1977. He belongs to the Augustinians, the religious order that founded the university near Philadelphia in 1842. Now his alma mater is finding new and inventive connections to his papacy.

On Sunday, the men's and women's basketball teams from Villanova will open the season in Rome with a Catholic university matchup, playing Notre Dame 6 miles (9.6 kilometers) from the Vatican in what organizers are calling [the Eternal City Tip-Off](#). The doubleheader comes only weeks after Villanova hosted a sustainability conference in Rome and awarded a cardinal with the inaugural Pope Leo XIV Sustainability Medal.

"It's crazy," Donohue said. "We're taking over Rome."

Villanova saw applications jump more than 10% during the first admissions cycle after the pope's 2025 election.

"We claimed it was 'the Pope Leo effect,'" Donohue said.

Pope Leo's alma mater is a basketball powerhouse

Villanova is the only American university that can claim a pope as a graduate — a distinction that has elevated its profile alongside a run of athletic success.

The school won the NCAA men's basketball championship in 1985, 2016 and 2018. Three alums dubbed the ['Nova Knicks](#) were instrumental in the New York Knicks winning the NBA title this year.

Over Halloween weekend, the power of [Catholic school basketball](#) will be in full effect as 6,000 Villanova fans and 1,000 Notre Dame fans travel to watch their

teams compete.

"The voice of the people of God will be very strong on the Villanova side," Leo said in September.

The festivities were planned long before Leo's recent [cancer diagnosis and surgery](#). The [sports-loving pope](#) is scheduled — health permitting — to hold a private audience inside the Vatican on Saturday for the teams and their traveling fans. Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson Perez will also celebrate a private Mass for them in St. Peter's Basilica.

Ed Hastings, who played on Villanova's 1971 basketball team that lost the national championship to UCLA and now teaches at Villanova, will appear on a sold-out panel in Rome. He will be discussing sports and spirituality, bringing together "the passions of my life," he said.

St. Augustine, who inspired the Augustinian religious order, wrote about self-knowledge. "And I learned a lot about myself through sports," Hastings said.

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On campus, connections to Pope Leo are a source of pride

The Rev. Bernie Scianna, Villanova's vice president for mission and ministry, is a friend of the pope, having met him almost three decades ago through their Augustinian order.

Scianna has seen an uptick in interest in Catholicism at the school, which has around 10,000 students and a large Catholic population. Last year, 24 people joined the Catholic Church on campus, most of them students, though fewer than 10 typically do each year. There are 56 people in the current class of potential new members.

"It's really a great feeling for us to be in this moment," he said.

Villanova has long sent students to Italy and the Vatican for internships and study abroad programs, but those opportunities are growing.

Senior Mike Whaley just returned from a fall break trip there with his humanities class. He had visited the Vatican on a previous student trip, where he was an altar

server at a private Mass for Villanova students celebrated by then-Cardinal Robert Prevost.

"So, my fun fact at parties is that I served Mass for the now Pope Leo XIV," Whaley said.

Megan Zuzarth, another senior, also was in Rome recently with her business school class.

The pope's connection to Villanova makes him even more relatable once you realize "he probably sat right here or he walked these halls," Zuzarth said. "He's one of us."

Church bells rang at Villanova for hours after Leo's election.

Cathleen Kershner, now a junior, was wrapping up her final exams. "I get a text from my grandma and she was like, 'Your pope! He's your pope!'"

Before he was pope, they knew him as Bob

Donohue was at a Chicago restaurant when he heard the Vatican conclave had chosen a new pope.

"It's Bob!" he screamed. A manager brought out Champagne to celebrate the new pope, [who was born and raised in Chicago](#).

Donohue, a fellow Augustinian, was two years ahead of Pope Leo at Villanova. Before assuming the presidency, he chaired the school's theater department.

As a child, while "other people were playing basketball and football, I was taking tap dancing classes," he said.

His background in musical theater has been surprisingly useful as he navigates fundraising and donor relations. "I tell everybody it's the biggest acting job I've ever had," he said, "and the longest run I've ever had."

Villanova has not been immune to the financial pressures many universities face, but it's faring better than most. The school has undertaken renovations and expansion projects and recently opened a new campus at a nearby shuttered Catholic college.

The Pope Leo effect certainly has not hurt.

"We're very proud of him, and very proud that he's an Augustinian, and very proud that he is leading the church," Donohue said. "Whatever we can do to help him, we're trying to do that."