



Villanova's Adrianna Hahn (31) competes for a rebound with Notre Dame's Kristina Nelson (21) during a second-round game in the NCAA women's college basketball tournament Sunday, March 18, 2018, in South Bend, Indiana. (AP photo/Robert Franklin)



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For weeks, passengers flying from Philadelphia have been met with a familiar [sight](#) upon reaching baggage claim at Rome's Fiumicino airport: the Gothic Revival spires that top St. Thomas of Villanova Church and have come to symbolize the Philly-area Augustinian university named after the saint.

"From Villanova to the Vatican," read airport screens touting the university's most famous alumnus: Pope Leo XIV, class of 1977.

The ads first went up in mid-October to greet arrivals for a sustainability conference Villanova hosted in Rome earlier this month. Two weeks later, however, the message flashing across the airport had changed.

"*Forza Gatti!*" — Italian for "Go Cats!" — appeared beneath a prominent Villanova "V" ahead of the university's Nov. 1 basketball season opener against the University of Notre Dame in Rome.

The Sunday matchup between two of the country's most prominent Catholic universities, dubbed the "Eternal City Tip-Off," will open the NCAA men's and women's basketball seasons and add another chapter to Villanova's deepening relationship with Rome since the election of the first Augustinian pope.

"We're taking over Rome," [said](#) Augustinian Fr. Peter Donohue, Villanova's president, on the university's back-to-back sustainability conference and basketball match both hosted in the Italian capital.

Leo will put something of a papal seal of approval on the event by meeting with delegations from both universities the day before the games. The Vatican has not said whether the pope will attend the matchups themselves, which will be played at

the 11,200-seat Palazzo dello Sport in southern Rome.

The Catholic school rivalry, however, is already producing a ripple effect in Rome.

Ahead of Sunday's showdown, the two religious congregations that founded and continue to run the universities — the Augustinians and the Congregation of Holy Cross — have placed a [wager](#) of their own on the outcome of the two games.

Whichever university finishes Sunday with the higher combined score from the men's and women's games will claim victory for its religious congregation, and the losing congregation will host the winners at its general house in Rome for Mass and a meal.

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"It came about over a conversation at dinner, talking about what could we possibly do to help bring some excitement to the games," said Fr. Joseph Farrell, head of the Augustinian religious order. "Whoever, in a sense, 'loses,' really doesn't lose, but wins, because you get to host, in a fraternal way, our brothers in faith, our brothers in ministry."

While Leo will meet with students, players, fans and officials from both universities ahead of the matchup, he showed his true colors when among journalists en route to France when asked which team he would support. Since Villanova is expected to draw most of the spectators, "the voice of the people of God will be very strong on the Villanova side," he [told](#) National Catholic Reporter aboard the papal plane.



Fr. Joseph Farrell (Courtesy of Augustinian Province of St. Thomas of Villanova)

The Holy Cross religious who will be rooting for Notre Dame "just chuckled at this," said Br. Paul Bednarczyk, head of the congregation. "Nobody questioned his allegiance."

Even if Leo is rooting for his alma mater in his heart, the pope has also drawn Indiana-based Notre Dame closer to the Vatican during his 17 months as pope.

The university has partnered with the Vatican in developing a sustainability education initiative, which [launched in March at Borgo Laudato Si'](#), on the grounds of the papal retreat outside Rome. Leo also has [tapped](#) Notre Dame faculty as members and consultants to the Vatican's social justice office and theological advisory body.

"Pope Leo has been tapping into the university to assist him," Bednarczyk told NCR. "Where other popes who were non-American had probably heard of the university, they were not as familiar with it as the Holy Father is — he's from Chicago, he's only an hour and a half away [from the university]."

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Though Leo is tacitly supporting the basketball event by hosting the university delegations at the Vatican — Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson Pérez will also celebrate a Mass for both university communities in St. Peter's Basilica — the weekend of events will be about more than sports. A sports and spirituality seminar will be held in Rome for the match attendees and both universities will participate in a service event with the Special Olympics.



Br. Paul Bednarczyk (Courtesy of Holy Cross Generalate)

The pope "sees this also as an opportunity to highlight the importance of Catholic education," Bednarczyk said. "I think bringing these two universities together, [run by] Augustinians and Holy Cross, both of us share pretty much the same charism around the importance of evangelization and education, and I just think that is extremely important for him."

That's not to say Leo won't be excited about the games.

A regular swimmer and tennis player, the sporty pope is also known to keep up with how his favorite teams are faring, most notably the Chicago White Sox. Augustinian Fr. Rob Hagan, chaplain of the Villanova men's basketball team, [told](#) The Philadelphia Inquirer that Leo would ask him about the team when they crossed paths and that while serving as a bishop in Peru, the future pope joined group chats to follow Villanova's 2016 and 2018 men's championship runs.

And as a Villanova student in the 1970s, the future pope attended basketball games at Philadelphia's Palestra, the storied arena dubbed the "Cathedral of College Basketball."

"The palestra would come alive when there would be games between two of the city schools," Farrell told NCR. "I know he was a basketball fan and would attend the palestra."

As for what will be served when one religious congregation cooks for the other, the menu is still being defined. Foods associated with each university's home region were initially discussed, but the possibilities quickly ran thin.

"Well there's Philadelphia cheesesteaks, but what do we have in Indiana? Corn." Bednarczyk of Holy Cross said. "There's not much."

Ultimately, the two sides settled on meals reflecting their congregations' roots. The Augustinians would serve an Italian meal in recognition of their origins in Tuscany, while Holy Cross would serve French cuisine in a nod to the congregation's founding in Le Mans, France.

But beyond the cuisine, little else has been planned out.

"We don't know what we'll be cooking yet, because we are confident that we will be having a delicious meal and enjoying fraternity at the Congregation of Holy Cross," Farrell, the Augustinian, said.

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