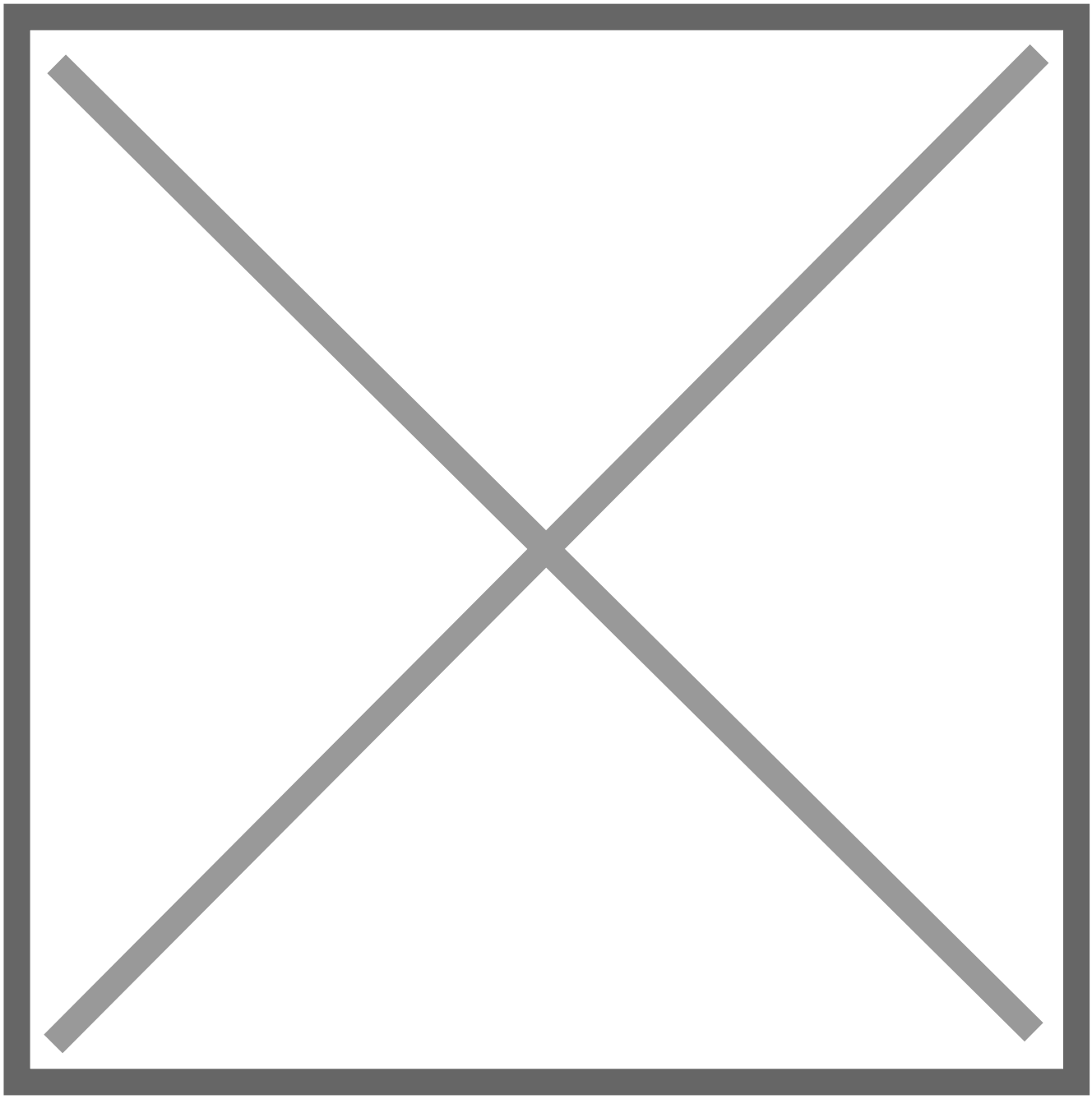
Vatican
Vatican News



Pope Leo XIV holds a basketball during an audience with delegations from the Notre Dame Fighting Irish and Villanova Wildcats basketball teams in Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Oct. 31, 2026, before the two teams open the U.S. college basketball season in Rome Nov. 1. (OSV News/Reuters/Remo Casilli)



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Pope Leo XIV appears to have fully bounced back from the lung operation that sent him to the hospital less than three weeks ago: On the stage of the Vatican's Paul VI Auditorium, he dribbled a basketball to the delight of 7,000 fans of Villanova University and the University of Notre Dame.

Meeting the two university communities on Saturday before their men's and women's basketball teams open the NCAA season in Rome — a game that has been in the works since the day of Leo's election in May 2025 — the pope was evidently overjoyed to be in the presence of fellow Villanova alumni who made up the vast majority of the crowd.

"Growing up on the south side of Chicago, we often heard 'Go Irish!' " Leo told the crowd, repeating the common cheer for Notre Dame's mascot, the Fighting Irish. "But as you all know, Prevost went to Villanova!"

"So the pope doesn't take sides," he said, drawing laughs from the crowd. "Prevost has another opinion, but we won't do that now."

The Vatican audience hall transformed into a college homecoming for Leo, the first pope to be a member of the Augustinian religious order that founded the Philadelphia-area university where he graduated in 1977 with a degree in mathematics. His fellow Augustinians say that the pope attended Villanova basketball games as a student there and followed its men's teams championship runs while he was a bishop in Peru.

Some 6,000 Villanovans and 1,000 "Domers" from the Notre Dame community traveled to Rome for the game, though meeting the pope "is the true highlight of this trip," said Augustinian Fr. Peter Donohue, Villanova's president in his greeting to the pope. Leo, in response, threw up his hands in gratitude and smiled at the crowd.

It was just one of several light-hearted moments during the meeting, which was preceded by Mass in St. Peter's Basilica celebrated by Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson Pérez.

When the pope was given a basketball by members of the Villanova men's and women's basketball teams, he feigned taking a shot and gave the ball a dribble. And while posing for photos with players from Notre Dame, the modestly-statured pope stopped to step atop the platform where his chair was positioned to gain a height boost alongside the basketball players.

Notre Dame players gave Leo a customized basketball jersey from their team — "Just what you always wanted!" said University President, Holy Cross Fr. Robert Dowd among laughs.

Backing his professed impartiality, "the members of two teams, even when they have a competitive rivalry, are certainly not enemies," Leo said in his speech to the university communities. "I hope, therefore, that despite the competitive nature of college basketball, there will be opportunities for the players and the fans of both teams to get to know each other in your days here in Rome."



Patty Esposito poses for a photo at a reception for Villanova University in Rome Oct. 30, 2026. (NCR/Justin McLellan)

An All-American affair in Rome

The election of a U.S.-born pope has brought a flood of Americans to Rome, but no event has better thrust the "Americanization" of the Vatican to the fore more than the "Eternal City Tip-Off" as the basketball double header in Rome's Palazzo dello Sport has been dubbed.

The event is the culmination of what began as a half-joking text exchange on the day of Leo's election between Villanova's Athletic Director Eric Roedl and the executive vice president of hospitality company On Location, John Anthony, who is also a Notre Dame alum.

“Hey, what do you think of Villanova and Notre Dame playing basketball over in Rome?” Roedl texted Anthony, according to the sports business journal. FOX and its sports affiliate FS1 got involved with the idea shortly after the pope's election and quickly got Villanova's head basketball coach, Kevin Willard, on board. The planning then required consultations with Vatican officials, Italian authorities and even a blessing from the NCAA to hold the games one day before the official start of the college basketball season.

From there, the American connections only grew.

Hallow — the U.S.-founded Catholic prayer app whose founder, Alex Jones, is a Notre Dame graduate — sponsored a pregame prayer broadcast before tip-off, and the American Christian marketing campaign, "He Gets Us," sponsored on-court advertisements.

The new head of the Vatican's communications office, Monserrat Alvarado — former head of EWTN News and a Mexican-American — was also present for the Mass and the papal audience as she began her new role after being appointed by the pope last June. Former U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See and Notre Dame alum Joe Donnelly also attended Saturday's Mass and papal audience.

Since Leo's election, both Villanova and Notre Dame have strengthened their relationships with the Vatican. Villanova had hosted a sustainability conference at the Vatican in mid-October and Notre Dame has been a major partner for a Vatican ecological education project and several university faculty members have been tapped to assist the Vatican's social justice office and theological advisory body in recent months.

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But against that backdrop, the religious orders which founded and still run each university — the Augustinians for Villanova and Congregation of Holy Cross for Notre Dame — have developed a friendly rivalry around the game. The congregations,

which are both currently led by Americans, placed a friendly wager ahead of the game: The congregation's school with the lower combined score of the men's and women's teams will host the general administration of the other congregation for Mass and dinner at their Rome headquarters.

Pope's alma mater shows up in force

Despite the understood papal support for Villanova, the Wildcats men's and women's teams both lost their season debuts in Rome. The Fighting Irish men mounted a late comeback to upset the favored Villanova side, and the Notre Dame women's team dominated the game from tip-off.

Yet the Villanova fans cheered passionately throughout both competitive games, energizing the 11,200-capacity arena in south Rome. Each school also had designated student sections comprised primarily of students from each school currently studying abroad.

The pope's alma mater showed in full force to make its presence in Rome felt over the game weekend. Villanova fans walking around the eternal city wore illustrated t-shirts of Leo playing basketball or bearing the text "Vatican City" written with the "V" logo.

Two days prior, Villanova alumni, staff and major donors were welcomed to the eternal city with an ornate reception at a Roman villa overlooking the Vatican and complete with a performance from the university pep band.

Nathan Mathur, a junior at Villanova who made the trip over to Rome for the game, told NCR he was a freshman year when Leo was elected. Since then, the pope has changed his own experience of attending the Philadelphia-area university.

"It's one of the first things you get in small talk: 'You go to Villanova, oh the pope went there!" Mathur said. "It's such an added bonus to be connected to him in that way."

Patty Esposito, a 1980 Villanova alum and 45-year basketball season ticket holder, said this trip "was a no-brainer" for her and her family, but ultimately "the pope did the trick … we are all so proud."

She said that while the pope has professed his impartiality, the moments of showing his affinity for his alma mater, such as popping on a Villanova hat during an audience or lightly expressing his support for the Wildcats ahead of the game, "says a lot to Villanovans."

"I hope that Notre Dame, Boston College, Georgetown, everyone feels the same pride that we do, but he's ours," she told NCR.

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