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Pope Leo XIV is scheduled to visit Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in the Borro neighborhood of Montevideo, Uruguay, during the first leg of his 11-day trip to South America Nov. 6-17. (AP/Matilde Campodonico)



by Lucien Chauvin

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When Pope Leo XIV arrives at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Montevideo, Uruguay's capital, he may think he is in the wrong country.

The pope's visit to Uruguay Nov. 6-8 will be the first leg of his 11-day trip to South America. The trip will also include Argentina, home to his predecessor, Pope Francis; and Peru, where he served for decades before being appointed a cardinal in 2023.

The parish stop is among several Leo will make in Uruguay, where he will be the second pontiff to visit the country after Pope John Paul II's visit in 1988. Uruguay is the least Catholic country in South America, according to surveys by Latinobarometro, a regional poll. Only 33% of the population claims to be Catholic, compared to 54% in Latin America; 42% had confidence in the church, compared to 63% of people in the region.

The Guadalupe parish bucks that trend in a huge way. More than 50 people of all ages attend daily afternoon Mass there — much more than the cathedral in downtown Montevideo. The pews are filled for Sunday Masses, and parishioners are active in a number of church-sponsored activities.

"What you see is the fruit of our work. A systematic, organized pastoral plan that has brought many people to the life of faith," said Fr. Pablo Coimbra, who has led the parish for the past five years.



Fr. Pablo Coimbra has led Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Montevideo, Uruguay's capital, for the past five years. (Lucien Chauvin)

Coimbra came to the parish as the COVID-19 pandemic was winding down and quickly boosted ministries already in place and added more. Parishioners credit him not only with expanding programs, but also reaching out to residents to bring them into the church.

"Father Coimbra does not like us to sing his praises, but he has motivated some many good things. I was a drug addict, but he and the parish took me in and helped me change things for me and my two girls," said Cecica Gómez, 47, a parishioner.

The parish hosts alcoholics and narcotics anonymous meetings, and has programs to work with people with legal problems because of crime, including former inmates. It partners with the Missionaries of Charity to operate a school and offers all sorts of educational activities and sports, particularly soccer.

Coimbra said more than 15 different religious congregations or church-related organizations operate in the Casavalle barrio where his parish is located.

"We want to reach residents of all ages in our barrio. There are sports programs for the youth, job training for young adults and assistance for families in need," he told the National Catholic Reporter.

For Gómez and other parishioners, the programs Coimbra started to provide food and shelter have been game changers for them and put into practice the teachings of Jesus. "Jesus fed and clothed the poor and he embraced the homeless. We are doing that here," said Rosana Elias, 52, a lifelong parishioner.



Rosana Elias, 52, is a lifelong parishioner of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in the Borro neighborhood of Montevideo, Uruguay. (Lucien Chauvin)

The parish provides one meal daily to people in the neighborhood requiring assistance and contributes to a local soup kitchen, which it helped build, that offers three meals a day.

Gómez and Elias are recipients of one of the parish's three housing programs.

"The issue of housing here is urgent. Many houses are in deplorable conditions, without water and sanitation. It is not how people should live," Coimbra said.

One program, Better Homes, has improved at least 60 houses. It swaps out roofs and wiring, and in many cases, adds indoor plumbing. The other two programs are much more ambitious. One, Dignified Housing, has built 22 homes for low-income families without a home. Each house is about 540 square feet.

"The parish has been very supportive of us," Gomez said. "I now have a home where I can raise my daughters. Our lives are so much different today, because we have a place that is ours."

Elias has lived in Casavalle most of her life, attending the parish school as a child. She recently fell on hard times and could no longer afford rent. The parish stepped up and offered her a home.

"Being part of the parish is everything to me," she said. "The parish has helped me have a home of my own and now I need to give back. I help out with different programs, because there are many people who need support."

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The newest housing project, which began this year, is the Guadalupe Family Complex. The project includes a series of housing blocks, each with 18 condominium-style homes. The parish will have built or refurbished 100 homes when the first phase of the Guadalupe project is complete.

Parishioners are looking forward to showing off the parish and the work being done when Leo visits. He is scheduled to celebrate Mass at the parish and will meet with parishioners and hear from several residents.

Braulio Carrasco, 68, has lived in Casavalle his entire life. He went to the parish school and attends daily Mass.

"This is a barrio where people do not have much, but they care for each other. We are all waiting for the pope's visit to show him what our faith has accomplished," he said.

Gómez said she never expected to see the pope in person. "It is huge that the pope is coming here. We are anxiously counting the days," she said.

This story appears in the **Pope Leo in Uruguay, Argentina and Peru** feature series. View the full series.