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Pope Leo XIV greets the faithful as he arrives to celebrate Mass at Parque Paris Londres in Paysandu, Uruguay, Nov. 7, 2026. (AP/Gustavo Garello)

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PAYSANDÚ, Uruguay — November 7, 2026

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Pope Leo XIV urged an estimated 40,000 people in Uruguay on Saturday (Nov. 11) to build bridges of fraternity and faith, using his first Mass in South America to deliver an ode to the region's beloved mate tea and raise the profile of the Catholic Church in its most secular country.

The crowd erupted in the stadium chant of "Olé, olé, olé, olé, pope, pope!" when Leo's plane landed in Paysandú, in western Uruguay on the border with Argentina. They cheered again, blew horns and waved yellow handkerchiefs when he arrived in his open-sided popemobile at the Mass site in Parque París Londres, a sprawling green space on the southern edge of the city.

In his homily, Leo reminded them that the Catholic faith had been "part of the life of the Uruguayan people since their earliest days, and it must be passed on to future generations with creative courage!"

More than 30,000 people — many from Uruguay but also from neighboring Argentina and Brazil — had registered in advance to attend the service, around 375 kilometers (230 miles) from the capital, Montevideo. The Vatican said Saturday that another 10,000 had attended, despite the morning rain and blustery, gray skies.

Because of its accessible location on the Uruguay River, the city was chosen to host Leo's first Mass at the start of his three-nation South American tour that was in doubt after he underwent lung cancer surgery on Oct. 13.



Faithful drink mate, a traditional South American herbal infusion, as they follow Pope Leo XIV presiding over Mass at Parque París Londres in Paysandú, Uruguay, Nov. 7, 2026, on the second day of his apostolic journey to South America. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

"He's the representative of Christ but he's human. And we weren't sure if he could make it, but he pushed through for us," said Soledad Sánchez, 73, who had driven to Paysandú from northern Uruguay, her eyes filling with tears. "He made it here to give us a message of peace because he knows our world needs it right now."

Leo, who arrived in Uruguay on Nov. 6, is urging the people in South America's most secular country of 3.5 million to turn to the Catholic faith for strength in confronting today's problems and challenges.

In his homily, Leo asked the faithful to build bridges of fraternity, recalling the nearby bridge over the Uruguay River that connects Uruguay and Argentina and over which many pilgrims crossed to attend the Mass.

He also pointed to the ritual of drinking mate, the bitter herbal tea that Uruguayans and their neighbors carry everywhere, as a poignant symbol of unity and encounter that he suggested should be applied to spreading the faith.



Catholic faithful hold an Argentine flag bearing images of the late Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV as they wait for Pope Leo XIV to arrive to celebrate Mass at Parque Paris Londres in Paysandu, Uruguay, Nov. 7, 2026. (AP/Gustavo Garello)

Mate, a cherished national symbol in Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay, is above all a sharing ritual. The leaves are steeped in a hollowed gourd and the drink is sipped through a metal straw called a bombilla, and the gourd passes from hand to hand among friends, family and sometimes strangers, refilled for hours.

Everyone drinks from the same straw, and Uruguayans drink more mate per person than people anyone else, roughly 9 kilograms (about 20 pounds) of the dried leaf a year, according to industry estimates.

"We must reflect on these symbols that we share, which give us identity and a sense of belonging, which speak to us of our origins and point us toward the future," Leo said.

The message landed.

"I'm not religious. I'd never go to Mass if it weren't the pope, but he surprised me. He made it appealing, the way he talked about things we all have in common, like mate," said Jorge Monzón, 64, from Paysandú. "I personally felt a sense of communion."

Leo was to press the message of the church's commitment to helping Uruguayans later Saturday by touring a Montevideo neighborhood beset by drug trafficking and gang violence. The church is working in the area with municipal authorities to build housing and provide rehab programs for addicts.



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His final event Saturday was likely to drive home the call to reject religious indifference and embrace the faith: a prayer vigil in Montevideo's Centenary Stadium.

Argentines flock to see Leo across the border

Located in western Uruguay and just across a bridge from the eastern Argentine city of Colón, Paysandú was easier to reach for many Argentines than any of the stops on Leo's tour in Argentina, his next stop after Uruguay.

In Argentina, Leo will visit Buenos Aires, Luján and Córdoba before heading to Peru, his second homeland and the final destination of his tour.

"Argentina is a much more religious country than Uruguay, and there's this desire to be here to witness something historic," said Luciana Lobato, 20, an Argentine tour agent who organized buses for 180 pilgrims from across the border.

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Some young Catholics involved in local church groups hoped the sight of a pope drawing crowds would challenge Uruguay's image as a country indifferent to religion.

"The reality I see in my town is that there are tons of young people who are really interested in religion, who are trying to find meaning and community in difficult moments," said Teresa Sabellini, 18, from Paysandú.

"And now look around here. This place is full of people," she added.

Leo's mention of bridges in his homily resonated with Laiana Córdoba, who drove 20 hours and crossed the border from Cascavel, in southern Brazil, to hear it. "It's something we understand, being neighbors means more than just sharing a border. It means finding ways to connect, opening paths to each other," she said.

Still, Paysandú itself greeted the pope quietly, as though it were an ordinary weekend, with scant decorations and only a few homes seen flying Vatican flags.

Some younger attendees on Saturday said Leo's humane tone and emphasis on care for the vulnerable resonated beyond the faithful in their secular country as people grapple with a turbulent world.

"I wouldn't call myself religious, but I like this pope. He has a really good message for humanity," said Santiago Biglieri, 18, a Colombian who lives in Uruguay. "Even

for the nonbelievers, there's something to take from his ideas."

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