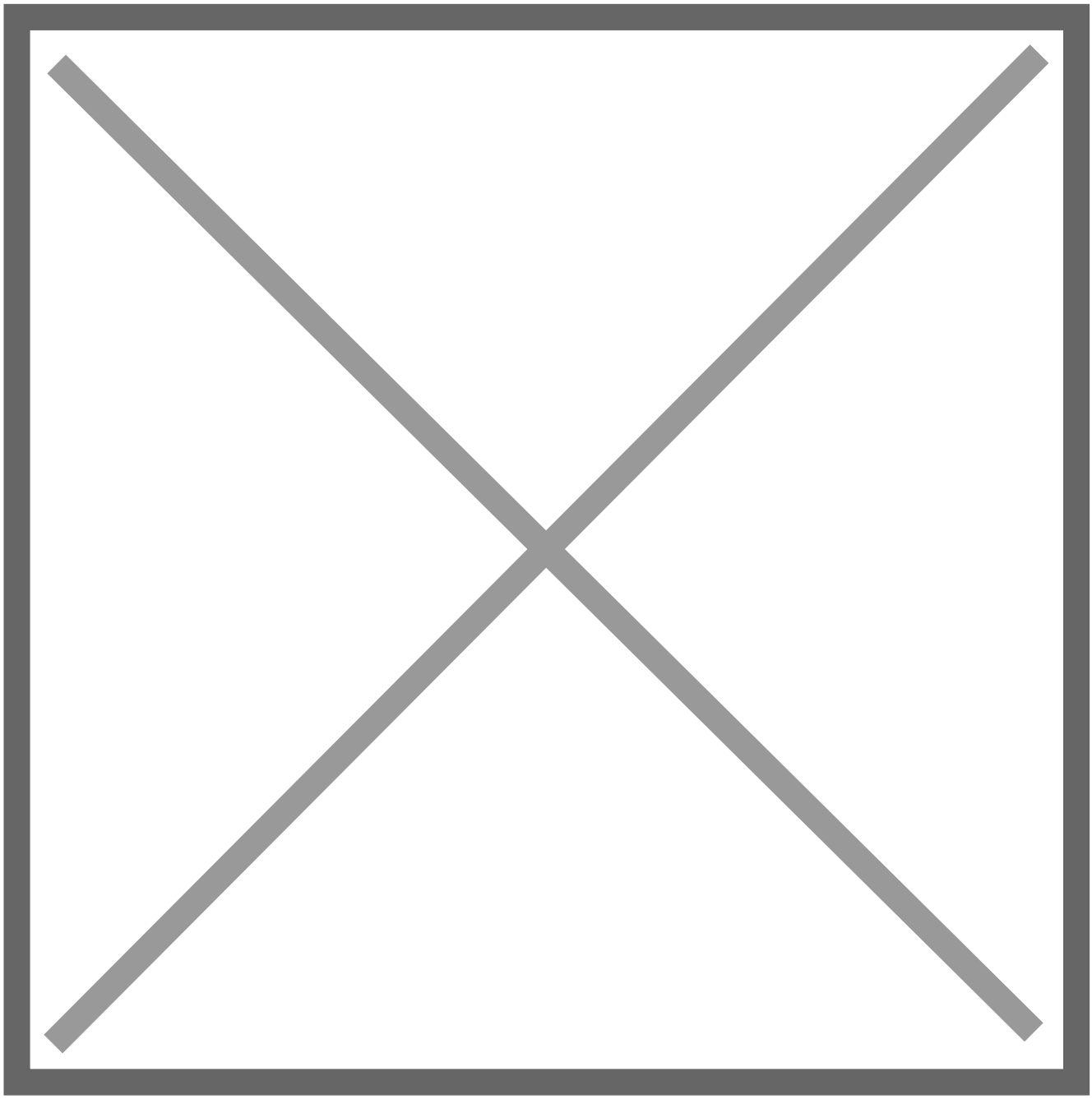
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Pope Leo XIV smiles as he addresses civil authorities and diplomats at Palacio Libertad, Centro Cultural Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Nov. 8, 2026, during his Nov. 6-17 apostolic journey to Argentina, Peru and Uruguay. (OSV News/Reuters/Yara Nardi, Fernandez)



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Buenos Aires — November 8, 2026
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A mural in the city of La Matanza outside of Buenos Aires depicts Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV smiling at one another under the text, "Francisco y León, un solo corazón" — "Francis and Leo, one sole heart."

The two popes, both Spanish-speaking sons of the New World, share a pastoral heart and markedly similar visions for the church, but Leo distinguished himself from his predecessor on Sunday afternoon by checking a box long left on the late pope's to-do list: visiting Francis' native Argentina.

Leo's arrival in Buenos Aires Nov. 8 bookends the question that lingered over the 12-year pontificate of his predecessor, who never returned to his home nation during his papacy.

The globetrotting Francis visited practically everywhere else a pope could go, including neighboring Chile and Brazil, and was the first pope to travel to Mongolia and South Sudan — thus his absence in Argentina was difficult not to read as a slight to his home country.

Leo's three-day visit to Argentina in advance of his own homecoming to Peru, carries a sense of consolation for the country which has not been visited by a pope since St. John Paul II's 1987 visit.

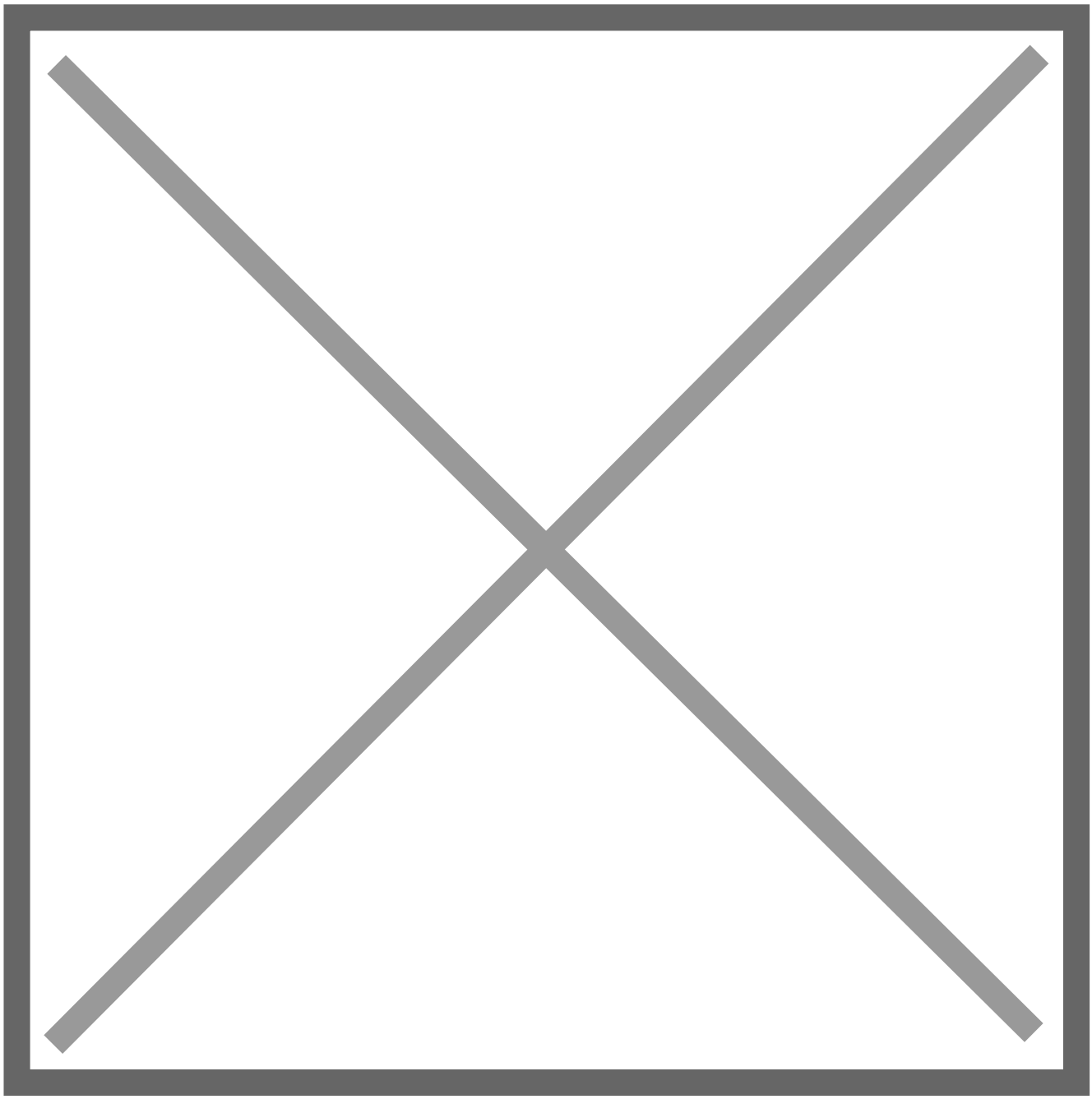
Francis' absence the 'elephant in the room' during Argentina trip

Though distinct from Francis in style and tone, Leo is aligned with his predecessor in the direction he has charted for the church and will inevitably draw comparisons to Francis while in Argentina, even if that is not the lens through which he himself views the trip.

On his flight from Rome to Uruguay, the first stop of his three-nation tour of South America, Leo told reporters that the primary motive for his trip to Argentina was "to spread the word of the church." Asked about how the legacy of his predecessor will impact his visit, Leo said, "I'm sure there will be many important connections, but it's not the primary business" of the trip.

Though Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican's foreign minister, acknowledged ahead of the trip that Francis' absence from Argentina would be the "elephant in the room" during Leo's visit.

Francis "is always going to be present because he was one of the most important representatives of his country," he told Argentine daily La Nación. "Of course, it would be difficult not to mention his teaching, his doctrine, his love, his vision in many moments."



Pope Leo XIV speaks with Argentine President Javier Milei as the pontiff addresses civil authorities and diplomats at Palacio Libertad, Centro Cultural Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Nov. 8, 2026, during his Nov. 6-17 apostolic journey to Argentina, Peru and Uruguay. (OSV News/Reuters/Yara Nardi)

Leaving the airport after his arrival, billboards showed images of Francis embracing a young Robert Prevost, and people lining the streets held banners of the two popes together.

Leo himself was quick to reference his predecessor upon arriving in Argentina, citing Francis' legacy among the first lines of his opening speech delivered to government officials in the amphitheatre of the Buenos Aires' Palacio de Libertad after meeting privately with Argentine President Javier Milei.

"For years, the universal church listened to the voice of an Argentinian pope, who treasured, in his memories and in his heart, the places, the people and the faith that he received here," Leo said during his first speech in the country following a 40-minute flight from neighboring Uruguay, prompting the amphitheater to break into applause. "Today, as his successor in the Petrine ministry, I am in some sense retracing his steps in this country where the personal history of Pope Francis would later be joined to that of the entire church."

Milei, a conservative populist leader allied with U.S. President Donald Trump, had attacked Francis on the campaign trail leading up to his election in 2023, but the two countrymen eventually reconciled when the Argentine president met with the pope in Rome. He too applauded upon Leo's mentions of his predecessor.

Introducing Leo, the president, a convert to Judaism, remembered "our beloved Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Pope Francis," soliciting strong applause and cheers. After the room quieted, he called the late pope "the most important Argentinian in history" who "with his humanity inspired all, independently of our creed."

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Francis' visit prevented by political polarization

Francis' meeting with Milei at the Vatican in 2024 was one of many with Argentinian public figures that sparked both praise and controversy in his homeland.Though Francis never returned to Argentina, his pontificate was highly scrutinized in the Argentine press which frequently politicized his words and actions.

Many attributed his decision to never return home precisely to the country's pronounced political polarization, which for generations has pinned pro-state interventionist progressives against pro-business libertarians, the latter of which includes Milei.

Francis had long said he was planning on visiting Argentina, "the question is why he left it so late," said Austen Ivereigh, Francis' biographer. "I think the answer to that is what they call in Argentina la grieta, or 'the rift,' Argentina's famously polarized political culture … almost everything Francis did or said was interpreted by these different lenses and used by either side."

While Francis "wanted to come back in such a way that he could help to overcome that polarization," Ivereigh said the late pope "never quite got that spiritual consolation that he would need to say 'yes, I should go.' "

Now, the task of addressing Argentina's political polarization falls to Leo, who has made unity a central theme of his pontificate and whose speaking style, unlike Francis', gravitates more toward the diplomatic rather than the provocative.

Addressing government officials alongside Argentina's president, who has been criticized for expanding the role of the executive branch to advance his political agenda, the pope praised the country's legacy of democracy, which he said is strengthened "through willingness to listen, through careful use of words, through the patient search for agreement, and through the ability to see those who think differently as fellow citizens with whom we share a common future."

"History teaches us how much a people can grow when their disagreements become an opportunity for dialogue and encounter," Leo said.

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A new pope arrives in Argentina

Leo's visit to polarized Argentina benefits from his mild-mannered nature and the lack of baggage as a foreigner.

Modern papal homecomings have been something of a mixed bag. St. John Paul II was received with overwhelming enthusiasm in his native Poland in his first visit there a year after his election in 1978, which is credited with helping foster the anti-communist resistance in the Soviet-occupied country. During his first apostolic voyage to Germany, however, Pope Benedict XVI was met in Berlin by protestors demonstrating against the church's sex abuse crisis and teaching on homosexuality.

"When Wojtyla was elected pope, immediately the Polish people understood that he was the symbol of their unity," explained Guzmán Carriquiry, the former secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America who served under Francis. "It was not that way for Francis in Argentina," he added,where some had criticized the pope for his perceived collaboration with the Argentine dictatorship in the 1970s.

"The missing trip of the pope to his homeland is a great enigma," the longtime curia official told reporters before the pope's trip. "Pope Leo is coming to provide cover for an absence that remained" after Francis' death.

Though not the central component of Leo's trip to Argentina, the pope is expected to pay homage to his predecessor during his visit to the Cathedral of Buenos Aires on Monday, where a museum dedicated to the Argentine pope was established shortly after his election in 2013.

The gesture will only further make explicit the connection between the two popes. But over the next three days in Argentina, Leo will also begin to establish his own relationship with a country that still sees him, in part, through Francis.

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