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Pope Leo XIV, greets Marta Torres during his meeting with the staff and residents of the Pequeño Cottolengo Don Orione in Claypole, Argentina, on the fourth day of his twelve-day apostolic journey to South America, Monday, Nov. 9, 2026. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

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Pope Leo XIV visited a home for people with disabilities Monday and told them their lives were a blessing, not a burden, as he pressed his call for Argentina to care for its most vulnerable in a symbolic rebuke of President Javier Milei's austerity measures.

Before drawing an estimated 2.5 million people to his first Mass in Argentina, Leo made a pilgrimage to the Cottolengo Don Orione in Claypole, south of Buenos Aires. Founded by an Italian priest in 1935, the institution houses more than 400 people with disabilities on its 123-acre (50-hectare) grounds.

The center, known as the "city of charity," has been hit hard by Milei's austerity measures, which have severely affected healthcare and social services. Milei has taken his signature chain saw to specialized therapy programs that for decades have been a lifeline for many of Argentina's estimated 5 million people with disabilities, freezing payments and dismantling a vital safety net.

Some residents and employees wept as Leo arrived Monday and embraced people in wheelchairs. He told them their lives were a blessing, not a burden on society.

"You can help us to remember the foundation of the dignity of every human being and what is truly important in life," Leo said in the center's chapel.

"A nation's progress is also measured by how it welcomes all people with disabilities and particular needs," he added.

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Argentina's Congress overrode Milei's veto last year to pass a law increasing funding for disability care. But his administration has resisted implementation, citing concerns that it would undermine his hard-won fiscal balance. Care homes such as Cottolengo are still owed hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Leo's visit comes days before the Senate is due to consider legislation that would set aside money for disability benefits in next year's budget. Milei opposes the measure.

Given the circumstances, it was deeply significant that Leo chose to start his visit to Argentina by meeting with the Cottolengo guests, said Kuyen Rolon Rey, a volunteer at the home.

"The people here deserve this grace," Rolon Rey said. "Choosing such a small place, but big if measured with love, makes us very happy."

The pressure and media attention surrounding the papal visit paid off, at least partially, said Fernando Montero, who oversees the home's disability services. Just over a week ago, the government paid Cottolengo Don Orione about 828 million pesos (roughly $535,000) for medications, diapers and food, covering about four months at the home, he said.

The first papal Mass in nearly 40 years

The visit kicked off a busy day for Leo in which the American pope, fulfilling the unfinished legacy of Argentine Pope Francis, is emphasizing Catholic social teaching that calls for putting the weakest and most vulnerable at the center of economic policy.

For many Argentines, though, the day's highlight was Leo's late-morning Mass at the Monumento a los Españoles, which the Vatican said drew 2.5 million people, Leo's biggest liturgical turnout to date. The same site hosted the last papal Mass in Argentina, celebrated by St. John Paul II nearly 40 years ago.

Thousands arrived at midnight to secure a good spot for Leo's first Mass in Argentina. It got underway under blue skies on a day declared as a national holiday

to allow people to attend and relieve normal commuting traffic around the central site.

Among those in the VIP seats were Milei and his sister, Karina Milei, the secretary-general of the presidency.

In his homily, Leo said Argentine families are facing situations of joblessness, violence and addictions, but are still the bedrock of society.

"Do not give in to those who dismiss the Christian family as outdated. On the contrary, today more than ever, it remains a pillar amid the many insecurities of our time," he said.

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Isabel Martín, 73, came with her parish group from San Andrés Avelino. She said she was praying for Leo to "touch the heart" of Milei, whose spending cuts have also hit pensioners hard.

"The pope was very specific in his message yesterday," she said, referring to Leo's inaugural speech to Milei. "The weakest cannot be the ones carrying the burden of the adjustment, especially poor retirees. If anyone can make him reconsider, it's the pope."

Argentina's minimum pension is approximately $300, about a quarter of what an older adult needs to cover medicine, housing and food.

Leo's message was also resonating with younger Argentines, who have shown the sharpest decline in Catholic practice of any age group. Margarita Lanús celebrated her 16th birthday Monday while waiting for Leo's Mass, sharing a cake on the sidewalk with her large family.

"I really like that he says things as they are; he goes straight to the point," she said.

A message about an economy that serves

Upon his arrival Sunday and with Milei at his side, Leo cited Francis' frequent refrain that money must serve and not rule: "The economy must serve the person, not the person the economy," Leo said in his first speech in Argentina.

It's a message Leo is expected to repeat later Monday when he meets with business leaders, union representatives and leaders of popular movements at the Catholic University of Argentina.

Among those invited are domestic manufacturers battered by cheap imports since Milei scrapped long-standing trade barriers, and members of Argentina's largest labor confederation, who took their worries over job losses and shrinking wages to the Vatican in September.

Since Milei took office in late 2023, his austerity agenda has made him an icon of the global conservative backlash against the liberal establishment. Much like its counterparts in the Trump administration, Milei's government has portrayed the cuts to disability programs as part of a reform process aimed at eliminating fraud and waste in the federal bureaucracy.

Milei's administration brushed off any suggestion of a rebuke in Leo's comments. When asked whether the pope had criticized the government, Cabinet chief Diego Santilli said, "No, it's everything we've been working on."

Opposition leaders heard a pope taking Milei to task, though some were careful not to turn it into a political fight.

"I don't want to frame it as discord or dispute," said Buenos Aires province Gov. Axel Kicillof, the most powerful elected official in the left-leaning Peronist opposition, who welcomed the pope to the Cottolengo on Monday. "Let them listen to him, those who had their ears closed."

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