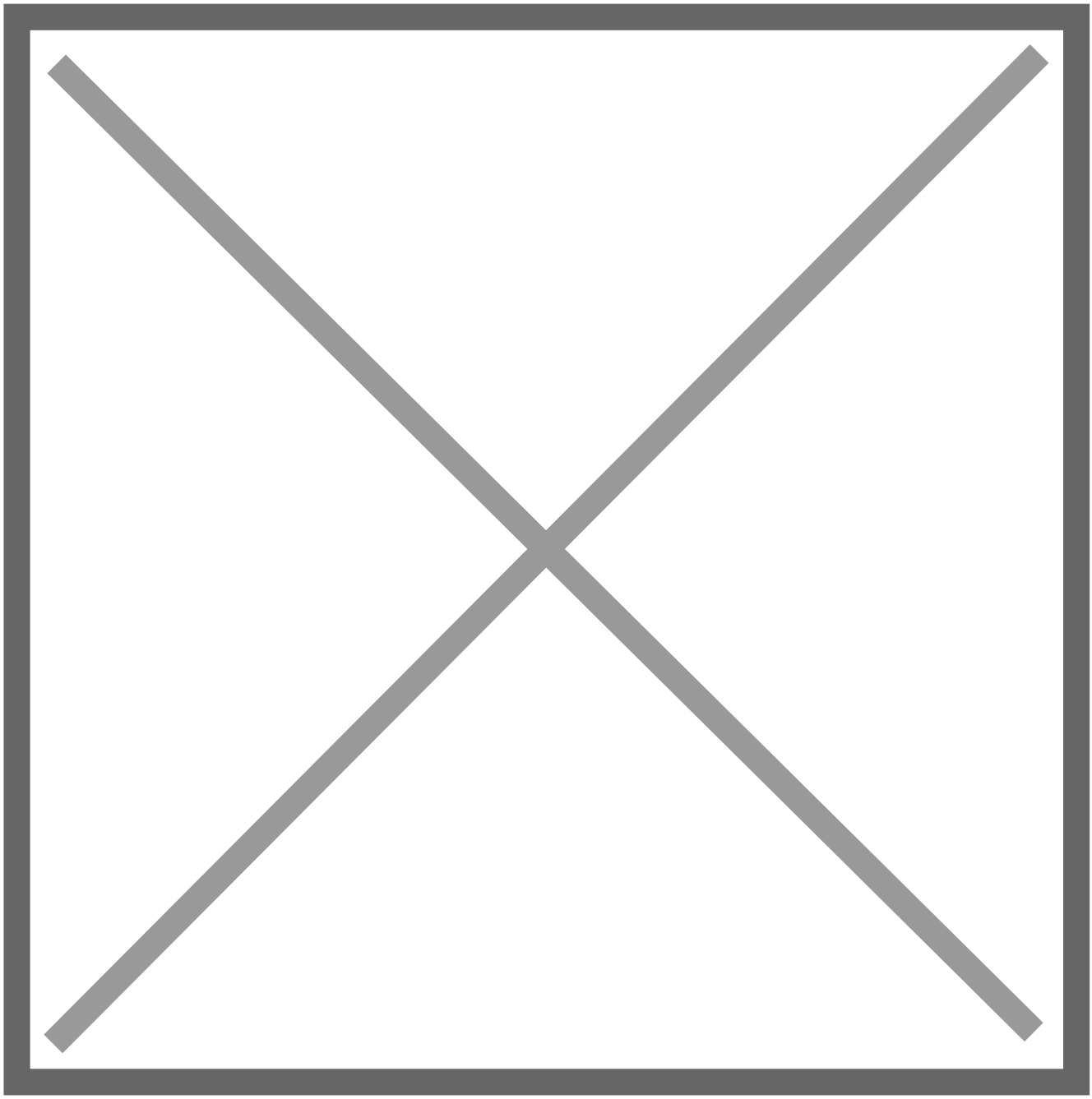
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Pope Leo XIV celebrates Mass Nov. 11, 2026, at the Basilica of Our Lady of Luján, Argentina's national Marian shrine, during his Nov. 6-17 apostolic journey to Uruguay, Argentina and Peru. (OSV News photo/Reuters/Pedro Lazaro Fernandez)

Ines San Martin

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ROSARIO, Argentina — November 11, 2026
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In a city transformed overnight into something resembling both a vast open air Marian shrine and an Argentine soccer stadium, Pope Leo XIV celebrated the final Mass of his visit to Argentina and called the country to "rise up and walk" along paths of reconciliation, communion and mission.

The Holy See Press Office reported that more than 2 million people had converged on Luján for the Nov. 11 Mass. The district has only 111,000 residents, meaning the crowd was approximately 20 times its normal population — and roughly equivalent to the entire population of Nebraska descending upon Peoria, Illinois.

Pilgrims had spent the night singing, chanting, waving flags and dancing to Argentine folk music in the streets around the Basilica of Our Lady of Luján. The atmosphere at times resembled the stands of a soccer stadium, with rivalries replaced by parish banners, Marian images and the blue-and-white colors of the Argentine flag.

But as the celebration began, the festive energy gave way to an unmistakable expression of faith centered on the Eucharist and the small terracotta image of Mary venerated as Argentina's national patroness.

Leo's vestments offered a final visual synthesis of the celebration. Instead of the green ordinarily associated with Ordinary Time, he wore a pale blue chasuble embroidered in gold with the mantle of Our Lady of Luján. The colors evoked both

the Virgin and the Argentine flag — as though, for the pope's farewell Mass, country and patroness had been gathered beneath the same mantle.

Among those given privileged places near the celebration were thousands of young men and women accompanied by the Familia Grande Hogar de Cristo, a Church-rooted network that assists people struggling with drug addiction and extreme social exclusion. Other reserved spaces were assigned to representatives of Catholic charitable organizations and groups serving vulnerable communities.

Leo used the structure of the Mass itself to propose a four-stage journey for Argentina: reconciliation, enlightenment through the word of God, communion and being sent forth on mission.

He began by recalling the country's natural beauty and the warmth he had encountered during his four-day visit.

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"I thank God for the opportunity to meet this beloved people who open their doors to everyone and who share their bread as well as their music," Leo said. "In this country there is always a place at the table for the newcomer, time is set aside to chat 'between sips of mate,' and a helping hand is extended to those in need."

Celebrating at Argentina's most important Marian shrine, Leo also recalled Pope Francis, who frequently visited Luján while archbishop of Buenos Aires, but was unable to return to Argentina during his pontificate.

Francis, he said, "always carried the 'Patroncita morena' in his heart" and taught Catholics through his life to love and venerate Mary.

The image of Our Lady of Luján arrived in the region in 1630, carried from Brazil on a cart headed north. According to tradition, the oxen pulling it stopped near the Luján River and refused to move until the small image of the Immaculate Conception was removed.

Its first custodian was Manuel Costa de los Ríos, an enslaved African born in Cape Verde who devoted nearly 50 years to caring for the image and receiving pilgrims. Known in Argentina as "Negro Manuel," he described himself simply as belonging to

the Virgin. His cause for canonization is underway, and the Church recognizes him as a servant of God.

Luján also has a historical connection to Pope Leo’s chosen papal name: The coronation of the Marian image was approved by Pope Leo XIII in 1887. Nearly 140 years later, Cardinal Robert Prevost was elected pope on May 8, the feast of Our Lady of Luján, and chose the name Leo XIV in honor of Pope Leo XIII.

The shrine that grew around the image became a central meeting place for Argentine Catholicism. Each October, pilgrims walk approximately 37 miles from the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Liniers to Luján, a journey that can take about 16 hours.

This year, municipal authorities used cellphone data to calculate that 2,860,933 people reached Luján during the annual youth pilgrimage — the largest turnout in its history.

In his homily, Leo acknowledged that many Argentine families are living through their own experiences of Calvary, including illness, poverty, unemployment, discrimination and family breakdown.

"We need to reconcile ourselves with our past and present, in order to build a new future where love has the final word," he said.

The pope's second step was allowing Scripture to illuminate moments of discouragement and confusion. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he said, people can feel "tired, disappointed or disoriented."

"We need a compass, a guide, and indeed we already have it in Sacred Scripture," he said.

Leo then called Argentines to communion, emphasizing that Christ's table has room for everyone, particularly "the poor and the hungry, migrants, the sick and prisoners."

Communion, he said, does not permit Christians to retreat into private concerns, exploit other people's needs or avoid their responsibilities. Instead, it calls them to participate actively in community life and offer their gifts for the good of others.

"Loving like Christ is not a matter of doing great things but of remaining faithful at the Lord's side," he said, pointing to the quiet heroism of parents, caregivers and friends who remain beside those who suffer.

The final step, Leo said, was mission.

"Go and evangelize; proclaim the joy of the Gospel through words and good deeds," he said. "Argentina, rise up and walk! Love and do whatever you please: if you are silent, be silent out of love; if you cry out, do so out of love; if you correct, correct out of love; if you forgive, forgive out of love. May the root of charity dwell within you; from that root, nothing but good can spring forth."

Leo noted that his pontificate began May 8, the feast of Our Lady of Luján. As millions of Argentines have done, he entrusted himself to her protection and asked her to guide the apostolic mission the Lord had given him.

"Help them to build bridges of charity and networks of solidarity," he prayed for the Argentine people. "Inspire in them the desire to continue along paths of reconciliation, communion and mission, illuminated by the word of your son Jesus Christ and firmly grounded in him."

Before departing for Peru, the country where he spent much of his priestly ministry, Leo thanked Argentina for receiving him "with open arms."

"I have indeed felt at home," he said after the Mass, telling the Argentine people that he would carry them all in his heart. "Let us remain united in Christ, praying for one another and entrusting ourselves to the maternal protection of Our Lady of Luján."

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