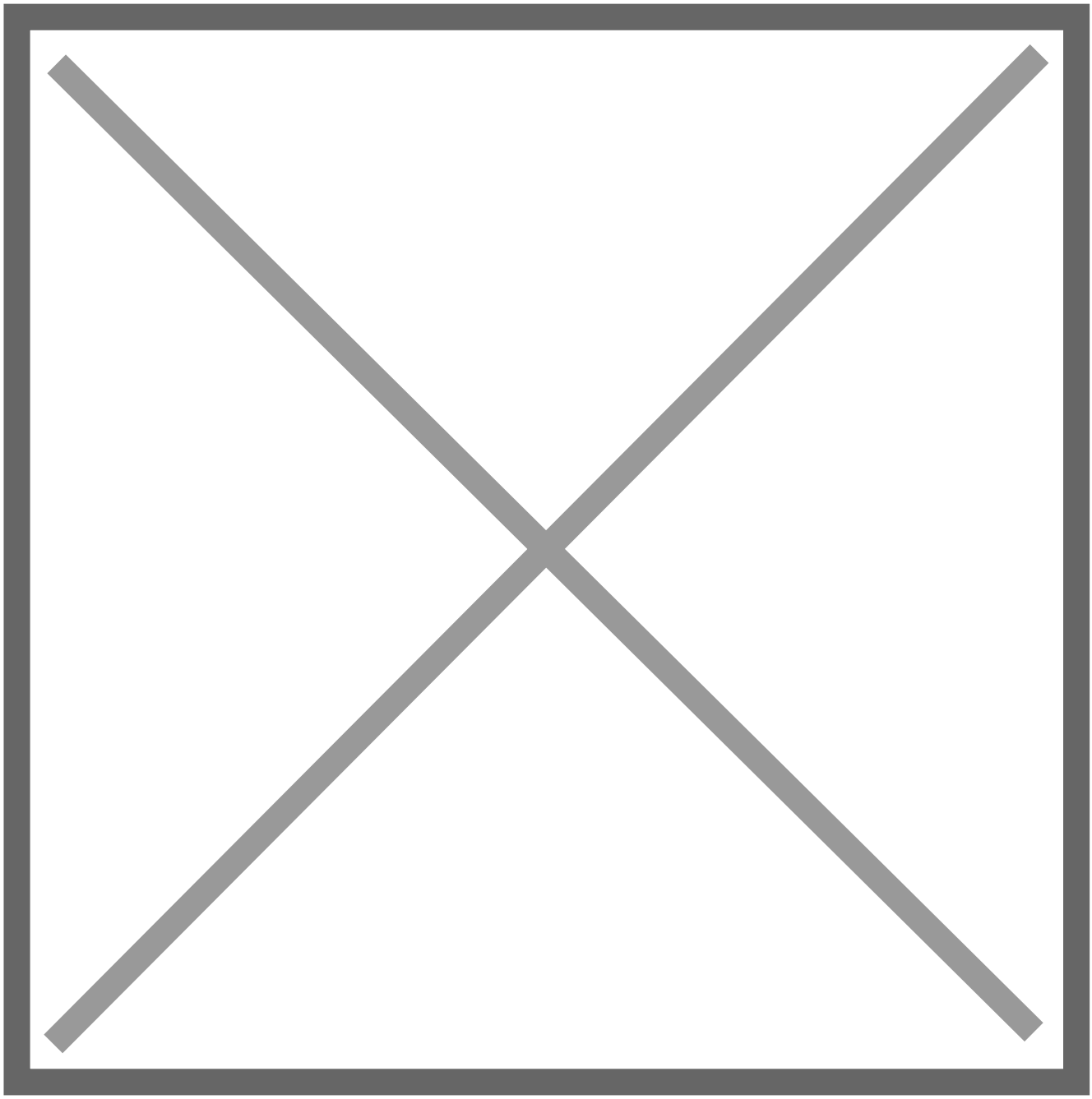
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Pope Leo XIV greets visitors and pilgrims from the popemobile while riding around St. Peter's Square at the Vatican before his weekly general audience Nov. 18, 2026. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Returning from a 12-day journey through South America, Pope Leo XIV spoke of the warm welcome he received in Uruguay, the legacy of Pope Francis in Argentina and the emotional homecoming he experienced in Peru.

"In Chiclayo, in particular, I felt at home," Leo told pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square for his Nov. 18 general audience, one day after returning to Rome.

"I was able to meet again with people who have left a deep mark on my life," he said. "My heart was filled with gratitude at being able to be amongst those communities and to strengthen them in faith and hope."

Reflecting on his Nov. 6-17 visits to Uruguay, Argentina and Peru, Leo emphasized the Church's mission to foster unity, uphold human dignity and build peace and justice, particularly in societies facing division and hardship.

He also spoke about meeting privately with victims of abuse during the journey, saying he sought to encourage the faithful through his ministry "and I also sought to do so by meeting personally, here as in other countries, some victims of abuse."

Leo began his trip in Uruguay, where Catholics make up a minority of the population, a fact he said made it significant that he chose to begin his journey there.

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The pope said the warm reception he received in Uruguay allowed him to emphasize the importance of faith and the value of human life, particularly in helping people confront life's difficulties and become "builders of peace."

In Argentina, the home of Francis, Leo said he wanted to meet the people his predecessor "loved so dearly."

He described the vision of the Church that Francis passed on as one that welcomes everyone.

"This is the vision of the Church that he has passed on to us: a welcoming Church, open to all, where everyone can feel at home, be listened to, recognized in their dignity, reconciled with God, with themselves and with the community," Leo said.

The pope devoted particular attention to Peru, explaining that he spent more time there because he owed "a special debt of gratitude" to the country's faithful.

In Chiclayo, where he served as bishop until 2023 when he was appointed to Rome as prefect of the Diacastery for Bishops,Leo said he rediscovered the faith expressed through "popular piety" and felt embraced by rural communities.

He also reflected on his visits to Cusco, where he praised the work of missionaries in incorporating the Gospel into local cultures, and the Amazon, where he met Indigenous peoples whose tradition of protecting nature has resulted in injustice and violence against them.

Drawing together the experiences of the three countries, Leo said his journey had revealed the resilience and beauty of local Catholic communities, even with social and political difficulties.

"Everywhere one recognizes how the Holy Spirit helps the Church to be a sign and instrument of unity," he said.

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