Vatican

Vatican News

Pilgrims wait for Pope Benedict XVI's arrival at Cuatro Vientos airport in Madrid, on Aug. 20, 2011. (AP/Arturo Rodriguez)

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Half a million young people are expected to pour into Rome next week for the biggest event of the 2025 Holy Year: a weeklong Jubilee celebration for young Catholics that will sorely test their tolerance for heat and the Eternal City's ability to provide public services, security and logistical support during its peak tourist season.

Officials said Wednesday the highlight of the celebration is the Aug. 2-3 vigil service, outdoor overnight slumber party and morning Mass presided over by Pope Leo XIV, the first massive gathering for history's first American pope. It's being held on the same dusty field on the outskirts of Rome where St. John Paul II led the 2000 World Youth Day, an even larger gathering of some 2 million young Catholics in that millennial Jubilee year.

With temperatures next weekend expected between 32C to 34C (90F to 93F), organizers have lined up five million bottles of water, 2,660 drinking water stations and 70 giant water cannons that are normally used for dust control during building demolitions to spritz the young pilgrims to try to keep them cool.

After attending a week of events around Rome's center, they will begin arriving at the Tor Vergata field on Saturday afternoon and spend the night there before the morning Mass Sunday, with access in and out requiring a 5 kilometer (three-mile) hike at minimum from the nearest public transport hub.

A massive security and logistical setup

Italian and Vatican organizers on Wednesday outlined plans for the gathering, which Rome authorities said represented the biggest technological setup ever in Italy.

Four thousand police and firefighters have been called up to provide security, with Spanish, French and Polish law enforcement agencies sending teams to help out, given the large number of pilgrims expected from those countries. Officials are closing the airspace over the Tor Vergata field to civilian aircraft and drones, and 122 surveillance cameras have been set up to keep watch on the proceedings.

"This is an event that because of its importance requires exceptional security measures," Rome Prefect Lamberto Giannini told a Vatican press conference. "We don't have any signs of negative attention to the event, but the international situation, the various tensions and the magnitude, significance and beauty of the

event require us to be very careful."

Some 68% of the young people who registered to attend hail from European countries, though pilgrims from 146 countries are expected, said the Vatican's Jubilee chief, Archbishop Rino Fisichella.

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A Jubilee that resembles a World Youth Day

The youth Jubilee comes at the halfway point in the Vatican's 2025 Holy Year, a once-every-quarter-century celebration of Catholicism that brings millions of pilgrims to Rome. Fisichella said 17 million pilgrims had attended Jubilee events so far in 2025, representing more than half the 32 million expected.

The event has assumed many characteristics of a World Youth Day, the Catholic youth rally taking place every three years that was launched by John Paul and maintained by every pope since. Heat waves and the invariable health issues that accompany them have become an integral part of youth days, since they are always scheduled during summer when young people are typically on vacation.

But such Catholic Woodstocks have also produced some of the most memorable papal moments. Many faithful still remember John Paul telling the youngsters at Tor Vergata in 2000 that they were "sentinels of the morning" at the dawn of the third millennium, Pope Benedict XVI braving a violent storm in Madrid in 2011 to continue praying, and Pope Francis telling young people in Lisbon in 2023 that everyone — "todos, todos, todos" — is welcome in the Catholic Church.

Volunteers, portable toilets and ambulances at the ready

The yearlong Jubilee, which was preceded by two years of intense construction projects around Rome, has added even more strain on Rome's public services beyond the normal tourist high season. To spare the congested city center, some 20,000 people will be housed on the grounds of Rome's old convention center on the city's outskirts, while another 40,000 will be housed in some of the 429-plus schools and 360 parishes around Rome that have offered to take them in.

In addition to law enforcement, 3,000 civil protection volunteers, 500 Vatican volunteers and 4,300 Jubilee "stewards" will be on hand to shepherd the young people around. A medevac helicopter, 43 ambulances, and 10 mobile health positions will be at the Tor Vergata field in case pilgrims fall ill. Rome's notoriously insufficient public transport system is being reinforced to provide nearly around-the-clock service and sanitation workers are clocking overtime to the tune of 4,600 shifts.

There will be 2,760 portable toilets, plus 158 for disabled people, spread over the event space of 52 hectares (128 acres), officials said.

"This collective effort is a big institutional test," acknowledged the vice president of the Lazio region, Roberta Angelilli.

This story appears in the **2025 Holy Year** feature series. View the full series.