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A woman in Madrid takes a picture of a poster of Pope Leo XIV May 28, 2026, ahead of the po

A woman in Madrid takes a picture of a poster of Pope Leo XIV May 28, 2026, ahead of the pontiff's June 6-12 apostolic visit to Spain. (OSV News/Reuters/Kacper Pempel)



by Justin McLellan

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Pope Leo XIV's highly-anticipated trip to Spain will end a 15-year wait for Spanish Catholics who have not received a papal visit since Pope Benedict XVI traveled to Madrid for World Youth Day in 2011.

But Leo's June 6-12 visit will show how he speaks on key issues that reverberate far beyond the Iberian peninsula.

With stops in Madrid, Barcelona and the Canary Islands, the pope is dedicating an unusually long time to his visit to Spain. His scheduled [trip](#) to France Sept. 25-28 is only four days.

While Spain is familiar ground for Leo, who traveled there frequently as head of the Augustinian order, as pope his visit will bring him into one of Europe's most charged political landscapes, where a fragile Socialist-led government faces a surging far right that has turned anti-immigration rhetoric to its rallying cry.

Pope Leo XIV greets Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez during a private audience at the V

Pope Leo XIV greets Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez during a private audience at the Vatican May 27, 2026. Pope Leo will make an apostolic journey to Spain June 6-12 to address the immigration crisis, inaugurate the Sagrada Familia basilica's Tower of Jesus Christ, and strengthen ties with the Spanish government and Spaniards. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Simone Risoluti)

In Madrid, the pope will make history becoming the first leader of the Catholic Church to address Spain's parliament; he is expected to speak on unity in one of Europe's most politically polarized nations. The pope will meet with migrants and organizations supporting them in the Canary Islands — a destination for migrants seeking to make the perilous ocean journey from the shores of North Africa to Europe. In Barcelona he will celebrate Mass at the [Sagrada Família](#), the basilica designed by Antoni Gaudí and now crowned by its newly completed Tower of Jesus Christ.

Peace amid polarization

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has emerged as one of Europe's most vocal critics of the U.S.-led war in Iran, positioning him as a natural ally with the pope who has repeatedly condemned the war and made peace the keystone of his pontificate.

Sánchez met with Leo at the Vatican on May 27, less than two weeks before the pope's arrival in Madrid. Afterward, the Spanish prime minister [said](#) the two had found much common ground on migration, war and multilateralism, and he described the pope's voice on the global stage as "common sense against irrationality and the law of the jungle."

The Vatican, in a brief but unusually detailed [statement](#) after the meeting, highlighted the "good relations between the Holy See and Spain" and said the two leaders discussed "the need to foster fruitful dialogue between the local Church and government authorities, as well as among the various components of civil society,

based on mutual respect and aimed at promoting the common good."

But Leo's visit comes at a delicate moment for Sánchez, who has led Spain since 2018 and now governs with a fragile coalition majority, while the far-right, anti-immigrant Vox party has become an increasingly dominant force on the Spanish right.

And Spanish media reports have suggested that Vox's growing appeal among Catholic voters has already drawn concern in Rome. Leading Spanish daily [El País](#) [reported](#) in February that Leo warned Spanish bishops in a private Vatican meeting about efforts to "instrumentalize the church" in order to "win the Catholic vote."

Another Spanish Catholic news magazine, Vida Nueva, confirmed the story through its own sources and [reported](#) that the pope warned the bishops about Vox by name.

The Spanish bishops' conference later put out a [communiqué](#) stating that the pope spoke with the bishops "on the risks of subordinating faith to ideologies without mentioning any specific group."

"There are many leaders that in the name of religion are dehumanizing people ... For a religious leader, like the pope, to ... say 'no' to racism, 'no' to inhumane treatment, 'no' to torture, in the name of God is very important."

—Helena Maleno

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Such a prelude raises the stakes of Leo's historic address to the Spanish parliament June 8, where he will become the first pope to speak at Spain's Congress of Deputies.

Yet Cardinal José Cobo Cano of Madrid said the pope's speech should not be read as an attempt to move Spain's political needle for one side or another, but to elevate the country's political conversation.

"We are used to seeing politics as rigid ideologies and confrontation," Cobo told National Catholic Reporter. "I think that the pope seeks to offer a different political reality and express gratitude for democracy and the political class."

Cardinal José Cobo Cano of Madrid arrives to concelebrate with Pope Francis the opening Mas

Cardinal José Cobo Cano of Madrid arrives to concelebrate with Pope Francis the opening Mass of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 4, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

"In Madrid, he will speak about the major challenges facing Europe and European dioceses," Cobo said, "but he is not there to endorse one message or another, rather he will convey the church's timeless message; that means sometimes it aligns with politics and other times it doesn't."

Meanwhile Santiago Abascal, the leader of Vox and a Catholic, [told](#) the conservative Spanish newspaper El Debate that he will attend the pope's address to parliament, but that his presence will not necessarily constitute an endorsement of Leo's message.

"If a religious leader, be it the Dalai Lama, the pope, a rabbi ... tells us that we have to accept a process of mass migration and the advancement of Islam in our society, we are going to say, 'no,' be who it may that says it," Abascal said. "That he prays for peace in the world, that seems good to me."

A migration hotspot off North African coast

Leo's rhetoric in support of migrants has been in keeping with that of his immediate predecessor, but his trip to Spain's Canary Islands will offer him his first opportunity as pope to visit a major migration hotspot and visibly highlight the plight of modern migration.

Whereas Francis rushed less than four months after his election to the Italian island of Lampedusa to commemorate migrants who had died crossing the Mediterranean Sea into Europe, Leo was largely confined to Rome in the first year of his pontificate due to the celebrations for the 2025 Jubilee year.

Leo did, however, [criticize](#) indifference and stigma toward migrants during a gathering of migrants at the Vatican for the Jubilee and questioned the pro-life ethic of people who are against abortion but "in favor of the inhuman treatment of immigrants in the United States."

People take pictures near a steel tribune structure in Madrid May 28, 2026. The site is being p

People take pictures near a steel tribune structure in Madrid May 28, 2026. The site is being prepared for an audience ahead of Pope Leo XIV's June 6-12 apostolic visit to Spain. (OSV News/Reuters/Kacper Pempel)

Now, his two-day visit to Spain's Canary Islands will bring Leo to the site of migration itself for the first time as pope, placing him at the edge of one of Europe's deadliest migration routes. In 2025, an estimated 1,906 migrants died attempting to reach the islands from the shores of North Africa.

The trip could provide Leo with a "Lampedusa moment" of his own, giving him a powerful stage to make his support for migrants visible in a country where migration has become one of the most contested political issues.

According to public Spanish polling data, 20.3% of Spaniards rank migration among the country's top three concerns, making it the second-most cited issue after the housing crisis.

Last summer, the nation was gripped by anti-migrant riots in southern Spain after three North African men attacked a 68-year-old Spanish man in the town of Torre Pacheco. A video of an unrelated attack reposted by far-right political leaders fomented the violence which resulted in the arrest of at least 14 people.

Helena Maleno is founder of the migrant advocacy NGO Caminando Fronteras ("Walking Borders"), which tracks migration routes into Spain and assists migrants at risk of perishing at sea. She said the message Leo delivers on the islands will take on special resonance in a context where migration has become both a humanitarian emergency and a political flashpoint.

"There are many leaders that in the name of religion are dehumanizing people ... that use God against Muslims, that use God to justify a genocide," she told NCR. "For a religious leader, like the pope, to encounter that dehumanization and say 'no' to racism, 'no' to inhumane treatment, 'no' to torture, in the name of God is very important."

Souvenirs for Pope Leo XIV's apostolic trip to Spain June 6-12, 2026, are displayed May 29 at

Souvenirs for Pope Leo XIV's apostolic trip to Spain June 6-12, 2026, are displayed May 29 at El Corte Ingles, a popular Spanish shopping mall that donated 1 million euros to the trip (US \$1.17 million), making it one of the biggest donors for the papal

event (OSV News/Paulina Guzik)

The pope's visit will also coincide with an academic [symposium](#), bringing together church leaders and academic experts to discuss migration across global contexts from the church's unique vantage point.

Michele Pistone, one of the symposium's organizers and founding faculty director of Villanova University's Mother Cabrini Institute on Immigration, said Leo's visit underscores the church's ability to address migration without simply falling into the vocabulary of partisan debate.

"The church has a unique ability here because it sits in places where there are people from across the political spectrum," Pistone told NCR. "It is a place where we can really encourage dialogue and mutual understanding and encounter."

"There's a huge possibility for impact by just promoting that kind of dialogue and mutual understanding," she said. "I think that's what Pope Leo is asking us to do as a church."

A spiritual stop at the Sagrada Família

While the pope's visits to Madrid and the Canary Islands will have more pointed political elements, his stop in Barcelona will take on a more spiritual dimension. The centerpiece of his visit there will be the Mass he celebrates in the Basilica of the Sagrada Família on June 10, a date which marks 100 years since the death of its architect, Antoni Gaudí.

The Basilica of the Holy Family, or Sagrada Família, in Barcelona, Spain, is seen in this March

The Basilica of the Holy Family, or Sagrada Família, in Barcelona, Spain, is seen in this March 13, 2020, photo. Pope Leo XIV will visit the famed basilica, designed by renowned Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí, during his visit to Spain June 6-12, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Nacho Doce)

Construction of the basilica began in 1882. In February, work on the tallest component of the structure, the Tower of Jesus Christ, was completed, making the Sagrada Família the tallest church in the world, though the building will not be fully completed for another decade.

Fr. Armand Puig is president of the Holy See's Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, a member of the Sagrada Família's theology commission and the author of a biography of Gaudí. He said the pope's visit will highlight the Christological heart of a basilica often admired primarily as an architectural wonder.

He said Leo's decision to bless the basilica's Tower of Jesus Christ will draw attention back to the explicitly Christian meaning of the basilica, whose radically distinct architecture can sometimes obscure its original purpose.

"The Sagrada Família has become a global icon, an icon that speaks to people of many races, cultures, languages and religions," Puig said. "But there is a spiritual impact, because it is a building intended for Catholic worship, for the celebration of the sacraments, above all the Eucharist."

The papal visit, Puig said, may also help deepen public understanding of Gaudí himself, not only as an architectural genius, but as a Christian believer whose art was inseparable from his spiritual life.

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Pope Francis [declared Gaudí venerable](#) in April 2025, putting the Catalan architect on the path to sainthood.

"Until now, the image of Gaudí was practically limited to the architectural theme," Puig said. "But we have been able to discover and rediscover what was already there, but was said and commented on very little: that primarily Gaudí is a man of faith, with hints of mystical tones, who lived his Christianity in an exemplary way."

"The rediscovered figure of Gaudí is a figure that serves to deeply unite art and faith, with the common link that is beauty," Puig said. "Gaudí's aesthetic is an enormous hymn to beauty and to the beauty of God."

But at the same time, Puig resisted reading the Barcelona stop as mere nostalgia for old Christian Europe. The Sagrada Família, he said, is "ancient and new because it is a dialogue with modernity."

"We are in the age of the image, and everything Gaudí represents is not image for image's sake, it is image that is pierced through by symbol, by deep meaning," Puig

said

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This story appears in the [**Pope Leo in Spain**](#) and [**Immigration and the Church**](#) feature series.