Colleen Dulle – Pope Leo's 'Masterclass' in helping Argentina love a New Pope

From one of the Jesuit magazine America's Vatican correspondents, Colleen Dulle, reflecting on Pope Leo's time in Argentina, one the 3 South American countries being visited by the Pope at the moment



In August 2004, on the Feast of St. Augustine in Buenos Aires, Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio celebrated Mass.

Standing nearby was American Augustinian friar Robert Prevost, who had come to open a new library for his order.

Nine years later, Bergoglio became Pope Francis. Twenty-one years after that shared Mass, Prevost was elected Pope Leo XIV.

Francis never returned to Argentina as pope. At the moment, Leo XIV is in the country for the first time as a pontiff — 22 years after the photograph of the two future popes was taken.

The Italians have an expression: "*Morto un papa, se ne fa un altro."* That is, "*One pope dies, they make another."* It's used to describe how everyone is replaceable, no matter how important they seem to be. But this week, it's been tough for me to harness that attitude, to move along nonchalantly from one pope to the next. Watching Pope Leo XIV visit Argentina, Pope Francis' home country, making a trip Francis was never able to make (first because of political polarization and then because of his health) has made me feel Francis' absence more acutely.

I imagine many Argentines have felt similarly this week, and Pope Leo must have anticipated that. His response, though, was not to turn the visit into a Francis-based pilgrimage, the way Pope Benedict XVI did in his 2006 visit to Poland, which literally followed the path of St. John Paul II's life and where he encouraged prayers for John Paul's beatification. Instead, Leo offered what Francis' biographer Austen Ivereigh told me was "*a masterclass in helping a nation that has lost a pope to embrace his successor."*

Francis has loomed large over this visit—in some cases literally. Several cities Leo visited boast multi-story murals of Francis; some including Leo, others not. The theme for Leo's visit, "*Bienvenidos todos: vayan y anuncien*" ("*Welcome everyone: go and proclaim"*), distinctly echoes Francis' famous saying that "*todos, todos, todos*" are welcome in the church. And several stops in the itinerary had explicit connections to Francis' life in Argentina. In a particularly moving moment, several of Francis' nieces and nephews presented Pope Leo with a white rose—an important motif from Francis' life, signalling God's presence—and a letter expressing hope that the rose "*may also be a sign of…our desire that the tenderness, hope and mercy Francis sowed continue to bloom in the Church*."

Leo made at least one reference to Francis in nearly every major speech he gave in Argentina, often calling him *"our beloved Francis*." He visited places dear to Francis, like the prison where Francis celebrated Holy Thursday and Christmas liturgies. (Interestingly, the prison visit was one of the few times Leo did not mention Francis in his speech.)

What was most striking was not the fact that Leo quoted his predecessor but rather how he did it. Although the crowds applauded each mention of Francis, Leo didn't use them as "applause lines" to curry favour with his audiences—in fact, Leo often seems to forget to pause for applause

after powerful lines in his speeches. Instead, Leo aligned himself with Francis' teachings and built on them, invoking Francis fondly before asking the crowd to move forward with Francis' pastoral priorities that have now been picked up by Leo.

For example, speaking to "*the world of work*," including the popular movements that were close to Francis' heart, Leo invoked the "three T's" often quoted by Francis—*tierra, techo y trabajo* (land, housing and work)—and wove them into a larger argument about how popular movements embody the principle of subsidiarity. The entire speech wove together the principles of Francis and other popes, into which Leo incorporated his own developments with *"Magnifica Humanitas."*

In his address to civil authorities, Leo extended Francis' concern for human ecology ("*Laudato Si'*" and "*Laudate Deum*") into his own concerns about rapid technological development and A.I. In his address to the clergy, religious and pastoral workers, he reflected at length on St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, acknowledging Francis' role in promoting them, and invoked Francis' calls for spiritual renewal, calling on the Argentine church to ask God, "*where he wishes to open new paths."*

The most striking example of building on Francis, though, came at the youth vigil in Buenos Aires, where he used Francis' famous "*todos, todos, todos*" ("*everyone, everyone, everyone*" is welcome in the church), shifting its emphasis more explicitly from inclusion to evangelization and conversion. In Leo's formulation, the phrase became "*everyone toward Christ, everyone with Christ, everyone like Christ" —* "*toward Christ*" meaning that everyone should be welcomed, especially those who are wounded or excluded, and "*with Christ"* and "*like Christ*" meaning that welcome is the beginning of a conversion that calls Christians to service. Here, the structure of Leo aligning himself with Francis and then expanding on his words is most evident.

It should also be noted that Leo, in these speeches, maintained his own style. He did not try to imitate Francis but showed his own pastoral character; one that is no less warm than Francis' but expressed in a different way, through frequent tears and passionate singing, which have only increased since his arrival in Peru.

Many commentators have noted that, while Francis was concerned about visiting Argentina for most of his pontificate because he was worried that his words or visit would be taken to bolster one side or another of *la grieta*—Argentina's political rift—Leo, as an outsider, was able to speak to Argentines without that kind of political baggage. He used that outsider status to call for unity and peace, his hallmarks, in a way that appealed to Argentines across the political spectrum. On "*Inside the Vatican*" (the magazine *America's* podcast) this week, I spoke to Argentine sociologist Hugo Rabbia, whose national survey found interest in and support for the pope's visit across wide swathes of the Argentine political spectrum; he pointed out to me the fact that attendance for Leo's Mass in Buenos Aires broke the record set by John Paul II, a feat made even more impressive by how much less Catholic, more diverse and more divided Argentine society has become in recent decades.

In short, the way Leo invoked Francis without glorifying him, aligned himself with Francis' priorities without carrying political baggage and built on those priorities meant that the visit, rather than being an exercise in looking back with nostalgia, helped the Argentine church and broader society look forward to a more unified and hopeful future—just as Francis would have wanted.

This article first appeared earlier this week in the 'Vatican Notebook' of America Media