



## 2026 Liberty Medal Ceremony Honoring Pope Leo XIV

*This transcript has been prepared for reference purposes and may contain minor errors or omissions. Full video of the Liberty Medal ceremony may be found on [the National Constitution Center's YouTube channel](#).*

**0:00:01.2 Speaker 1:** Welcome to the 2026 Liberty Medal Ceremony in honor of our recipient, His Holiness Pope Leo XIV.

[applause]

**0:00:22.9 Speaker 1:** We are honored to welcome members of the Religious Leaders Council, convened by Interfaith Philadelphia, representing more than 30 faith traditions across the greater Philadelphia region. Their presence reflects the spirit of mutual respect, religious liberty, and common purpose that we celebrate today.

[applause]

**0:00:53.3 Speaker 1:** Please welcome our distinguished guests. Senior Rabbi at the Congregation Rodef Shalom, Rabbi Jill L. Maderer.

[applause]

**0:01:12.7 Speaker 1:** Founder, President, and CEO of Esperanza, the Reverend Luis A. Cortés, Jr.

[applause]

**0:01:25.2 Speaker 1:** Director of the Mayor's Office of Muslim Engagement, Imam Quaiser D. Abdullah, PhD.

[applause]

**0:01:38.9 Speaker 1:** Pastor at Mother Bethel AME Church, the Reverend Carolyn C. Cavaness.

[applause]

**0:01:51.0 Speaker 1:** The Archbishop of Philadelphia, Nelson J. Pérez.

[applause]

**0:02:02.1 Speaker 1:** Mayor of the City of Philadelphia, the Honorable Cherelle L. Parker.

[applause]

**0:02:12.7 Speaker 1:** Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Josh Shapiro.

[applause]

**0:02:22.9 Speaker 1:** Interim President and CEO of the National Constitution Center, Vince Stango.

[applause]

**0:02:38.0 Vince Stango:** Good morning, everyone. I'm Vince Stango, Interim President and CEO of the National Constitution Center. Welcome to the 38th Annual Liberty Medal Ceremony honoring His Holiness, Pope Leo XIV.

[applause]

**0:02:56.9 Vince Stango:** We honor Pope Leo XIV today in recognition of his lifelong work promoting religious liberty and freedom of conscience around the world, ideals enshrined by America's founders in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. It is my great pleasure to welcome distinguished guests from across the United States and around the world, including members of the diplomatic corps, civic and faith leaders, and friends of the National Constitution Center.

[applause]

**0:03:31.7 Vince Stango:** There is perhaps no more fitting place to celebrate this occasion during America's 250th anniversary than right here in Philadelphia, a city that has long served as a crossroads between faith and freedom, conscience and citizenship. As we begin, we are honored to be joined by the leader of our city, Mayor of Philadelphia, Cherrille L. Parker. Please join me in welcoming the mayor.

[applause]

**0:04:05.8 Honorable Cherrille L. Parker:** Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Good morning, everyone. I want to say a special thank you to Vince Stango and our partners here at the National Constitution Center for bringing us together for this truly special occasion. It is an honor to join with our Governor Shapiro, Archbishop Pérez, Imam Abdullah, Reverend Cavaness, Reverend Cortés, Rabbi Maderer, and my fellow officials, and so many other distinguished faith and civic leaders here today. Many of the faith leaders on this stage that I often say when I am communicating directly with them and/or calling them for some kind of guidance, I often refer to myself as a praying mayor. My faith has carried me through every season of my life. And serving as your 100th mayor has only strengthened my belief that we are strongest when we come together in service of something that is greater than ourselves. Just yesterday, I want to note for the record, I had the honor and privilege of participating with mayors from across the nation as we walked through Independence Mall, reflecting on the birthplace of our democracy and the responsibility we as local leaders share to protect it. And then I was inspired to learn that this weekend, spiritual

pilgrims from across our nation are converging here for the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage, having crossed 13 states before arriving in Philadelphia.

**0:06:34.9 Honorable Cherelle L. Parker:** And now, elected leaders and faith leaders stand together as we prepare to honor His Holiness, Pope Leo XIV, with the Liberty Medal and ring one of the world's most enduring symbols of liberty. This moment marks 250 years of people coming to this city in search of liberty, hope, faith, and opportunity. And it reminds me that some of life's greatest blessings actually begin when we all choose to walk together. Democracy gives us the freedom to serve others. Faith inspires us to do so with love, humility, and compassion. As we honor His Holiness Pope Leo XIV with the Liberty Medal, may we all use this as an opportunity to renew our respective commitments to liberty, to passion, to humility, to courage, and remembering that empathy and compassion will help us continue building a brighter future together. God bless His Holiness Pope Leo XIV. God bless the city of Philadelphia, and may God continue to bless the United States of America. Thank you.

[applause]

**0:08:34.0 Vince Stango:** Thank you, Mayor Parker. To mark this historic occasion, we will ring a replica Liberty Bell on our front lawn, generously provided by the National Liberty Museum. For generations, the ringing of the Liberty Bell has symbolized both the promise of freedom and the enduring work of preserving it. As its familiar notes ring out once more, may they inspire us to carry America's story forward with courage, hope, and purpose. Please join me in welcoming Pennsylvania Attorney General Dave Sunday and National Liberty Museum President and CEO Dr. Alaine Arnott to lead the ceremonial bell ringing. They are joined today by the Center's Vice President of Development, Lauren Sylling, and her young children, Caroline and Samantha, whose participation reminds us that the greatest tribute to our past is the faith we place in those who will carry its ideals forward.

**0:09:28.2 Dave Sunday:** You got it you guys. Go ahead. Ready, guys? One, two, three.

**0:09:37.9 Alaine Arnott:** Ready, together.

[applause]

**0:09:47.6 Dave Sunday:** Good job, guys. Thank you to the National Constitution Center and the National Liberty Museum for inviting us to share in this meaningful tradition as they begin their 38th annual Liberty Medal ceremony. For generations, the ringing of the Liberty Bell has called Americans to moments of reflection and celebration. Today, it reminds us that the freedoms we cherish are strengthened when each generation embraces its role in our shared civic life. It is especially meaningful that Caroline and Samantha are joining us today. Their participation reminds us that America's 250th anniversary is not only an opportunity to reflect on our past, but to inspire and educate the youth of America who will shape our future. In 1787, when Ben Franklin stepped out of Independence Hall at the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention, he was asked, what sort of government had they formed. And his reply, "A republic, if you can keep it." Moments like this remind us that preserving those freedoms embodied by the Declaration of Independence and

enshrined in our Constitution is not the work of only one office, one leader, or one generation. It is a shared responsibility to live up to Franklin's charge to preserve our republic.

**0:11:05.8 Dave Sunday:** And that's why it is an absolute honor to be here today at the National Constitution Center, whose mission to preserve the legacy of our founding principles is enshrined in our Constitution and is absolutely critical. If we don't know our history, we can't learn from it, we can't grow from it, and that can lead us to lose our way. Our Constitution is our nation's instruction manual. Everything we do as leaders is governed and informed by our Constitution. As we mark our nation's semiquincentennial, we must also honor the Constitution that created that framework. For most of those 250 years of our nation, and we were asked to endure tremendous difficulties to become the nation that we are. Our Constitution is the rock upon which we will build the next 250 years. May the sound of this bell inspire all of us to continue building strong communities, serving one another with integrity, and ensuring that the promises of liberty remain as vibrant for Caroline and Samantha's generation and those who follow them, as it has been for ours and those who came before us. Thank you. May God bless our honorees today, Pope Leo XIV, and may God continue to bless America.

[applause]

**0:12:34.2 Vince Stango:** Just steps from where we gather today, the Declaration of Independence proclaimed to the world a revolutionary idea, that all people were created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights. A decade later, the Constitution established a framework for self-government unlike any the world had seen. And in the First Amendment, Americans embraced a profound principle that continues to distinguish our constitutional tradition, that government should neither establish religion nor prohibit its free exercise, protecting the freedom of every individual to worship, believe, question, seek, and live according to the dictates of their own conscience. As someone who has spent much of my professional life helping steward an institution dedicated to constitutional education and civil dialogue, I never cease to be struck by how extraordinary that achievement was. We often take religious liberty for granted because it is woven deeply into the fabric of American life. But the idea that people of different faiths and beliefs could live together as equal citizens under a shared constitutional order remains one of the most remarkable and consequential contributions of the American experiment. That commitment to religious liberty has never been merely a constitutional provision. It has been a source of civic vitality throughout our nation's history.

**0:13:56.6 Vince Stango:** From the Revolution to the abolitionist movement to the struggle for civil rights, Americans motivated by faith have called upon and challenged our nation to more fully realize its highest ideals. In one of the most remarkable statements of religious liberty in our nation's history, George Washington wrote to the Hebrew congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, that the United States would give to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance. More than two centuries later, those words remain both a promise and a challenge, a vision of a society where human dignity is respected, conscience is protected, and people of different faiths can live together in freedom and mutual respect. It is that vision and the ongoing work of advancing it that brings us together today. As America commemorates its 250th anniversary, it is especially meaningful that we gather to honor the first US-born Pope in the history of the Catholic Church. There is something deeply resonant about that milestone occurring at this moment in history. The Declaration of

Independence and the Constitution were among America's earliest exports to the world, demonstrating that a free people could govern themselves. Those ideas traveled far beyond our shores and inspired democratic movements across generations and continents.

**0:15:21.0 Vince Stango:** Now, in a different but equally meaningful way, America has offered another gift to the world, a spiritual leader shaped by a nation founded on religious liberty, constitutional self-government, and the dignity of every individual. And for Philadelphians, there is an additional point of pride. Just as this city gave birth to the Declaration and the Constitution, Philadelphia also helped shape the life and ministry of Pope Leo XIV. His years of study and service at Villanova University formed part of the journey that would ultimately lead him to the Vatican and to a position of global leadership. Today, we honor Pope Leo XIV not only for his historic role, but for a ministry that has embodied some of the highest aspirations of both faith and democracy. Through both word and deed, he has demonstrated how faith can inspire compassion, solidarity, and service. Affirming the dignity of every person, strengthening the bonds that unite communities, and reminding us that freedom finds its highest purpose when joined with moral responsibility and commitment to the flourishing of others. Those ideals helped launch the American experiment 250 years ago. They continue to sustain it today. And they remain among our nation's most important gifts to the world and to posterity. May we meet that responsibility with wisdom, courage, and humility, preserving these freedoms not only for ourselves, but for those who will inherit this nation after us. And may future generations look back on this moment and say that we honored the promise of liberty, strengthened the bonds of civic friendship, and carried forward the enduring ideals that have inspired Americans and so many around the world for 250 years. Thank you.

[applause]

**0:17:17.5 Vince Stango:** Religious liberty finds its fullest expression not only in our founding documents, but in the faith communities and civic leaders who have put those ideals into practice. It is our honor to welcome two distinguished leaders whose service reflects that enduring tradition, Reverend Carolyn Cavaness, pastor of Mother Bethel AME Church, followed by Dr. Imam Quaiser Abdullah, director of the Mayor's Office of Muslim Engagement. Please join me in welcoming Reverend Cavaness, followed by Imam Abdullah.

[applause]

**0:17:52.5 Reverend Carolyn C. Cavaness:** Good morning. I greet you in the name of the God of liberation, the one who led Israel out of bondage and who sustained our founding, black founding fathers and mothers through storms and struggles, and who still calls us towards freedom unrealized. I stand before you as the 53rd pastor of Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, which sits on the oldest parcel of land continuously owned by African Americans, purchased on October the 10th, 1791, by Bishop Richard and Flora Allen. But our story does not begin with a building. It begins with a walkout. In 1787, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were pulled from their knees during prayer at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church and told to worship in a segregated gallery. They got up and they walked out, not in anger alone, but in conscience. That same year, they founded the Free African Society, proving that religious liberty must be paired with communal dignity. While the Constitution was being drafted blocks away, they

were building the architecture of a free people. So, when I speak of religious liberty, I do not speak of an abstract principle. I speak of a kneeler pulled from prayer. I speak of ancestors who built institutions of care when the nation would not. To His Holiness Pope Leo XIV, our traditions sing different verses of the same liberation song. From the Vatican to Mother Bethel, we are bound by this conviction, faith is most faithful when it serves the least, the last, and the left out. And as we mark this semiquincentennial, may we be stewards of the promise, not merely celebrants of an ideal. May we... May every conscience be free, every voice valued, every child of God recognized as such, not because we have perfected our union, but because we are still by grace perfecting it. Amen.

[applause]

**0:20:24.0 Imam Quaiser D. Abdullah:** Good morning. Asalamalakim. Shalom aleichem. Pax vobiscum. Paz y bien. Peace and blessings to all gathered on Independence Mall and joining online from around the world. To His Holiness, Pope Leo XIV, congratulations on receiving the 2026 Liberty Medal. We honor your commitment to religious liberty, freedom of conscience, and human dignity. To the National Constitution Center, Mayor Parker, Governor Shapiro, religious leaders, elected officials, and civic leaders, thank you. I bring greetings from the Mayor's Office of Muslim Engagement and Philadelphia's Muslim communities. On the eve of America's 250th anniversary, anniversaries should do more than invite celebration. They should invite examination, an examination of who has fully lived our ideals, who has struggled to be included, and what responsibility belongs to us who are seated here now. The Islamic tradition begins its reflection on liberty with a fundamental truth, human dignity is sacred and inherent. The Quran declares, "We have certainly honored the children of Adam." Just verses before this statement, we see the devil looks upon Adam with contempt, resenting the honor that God has placed on the children of Adam. Yet in that same passage, God declares that he has in fact honored these descendants of Adam. The devil sees the human being as unworthy of that honor.

**0:22:00.9 Imam Quaiser D. Abdullah:** God affirms the dignity he places within the human family. Dehumanization begins when pride, power, fear, or difference persuades us that another person is unworthy of the dignity that God has already placed in them. That dignity precedes citizenship, nationality, status, political power, and even agreement. Government does not create human dignity. At its best, government recognizes it, protects it, and builds the institutions that prevent the powerful from violating that dignity. Freedom of conscience flows from that dignity. Conscience is where we wrestle with truth, accept moral responsibility, and stand accountable before the Creator. Coercion cannot produce genuine faith. It only produces compliance. When fully realized, religious liberty protects moral agency, the freedom to worship, to question, to seek truth, to speak, and to live by that conviction without fear. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, recognized this practical expression of that liberty in the principle of the establishment of the Charter of Medina. That covenant and agreement did not erase difference or command uniformity. Instead, it ordered difference towards a shared responsibility, mutual protection, justice, and the common good. The images you see behind me show that this work is present here in Philadelphia under our illustrious mayor.

**0:23:44.8 Imam Quaiser D. Abdullah:** It shows Muslims gathered in worship and service, young people and elders entering civic life, communities at City Hall, and partnerships centered on health,

safety, opportunity, participation, and belonging. They are glimpses of liberty becoming visible, of dignity being recognized, of conscience being respected, and of communities being built across difference. Today we honor Pope Leo XIV. May this moment renew our commitment to protect human dignity, to defend conscience, and to build the communities worthy of the liberty that we all proclaim. May there be salaam. May there be shalom. May there be Lépine , may there be ashanti, and peace for all people. Thank you.

[applause]

**0:24:43.7 Imam Quaiser D. Abdullah:** It is my distinct honor and pleasure to introduce two of my beloved colleagues, Rabbi Jill Maderer and Reverend Luis A. Cortés, Jr.

[applause]

**0:25:01.3 Rabbi Jill L. Maderer:** How powerful to be present with you right here at the location that bears witness to two different truths of George Washington, two different truths of our nation. Just west, George Washington's home, where he enslaved human beings. Just east, the museum that houses Washington's letter to the Jewish community. In 1790, when members of the Jewish community wrote to Washington seeking reassurance about their safety in the new republic, the president responded with words of religious liberty, words that I pray are meant for all people in his promise that the United States would give, "To bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." and that all who lived under its government would sit in safety beneath their own vine and fig tree with none to make them afraid. A bold vision still yet unfulfilled. To stand here together hauntingly demonstrates the complexity of democracy and the imperative to protect each other, to do the work of multi-faith solidarity. In our own time, when Jews and other religious minorities and vulnerable identities face hatred, suspicion, and violence, we are called, all of us, to respond. And so many have stood with my communities over the years. The ancient words of Jewish tradition teach, the first person was created alone for the sake of peace among people so that no one could say to another, my ancestor was greater than yours.

**0:27:23.6 Rabbi Jill L. Maderer:** Today, I pray for a renewed coalition in our city and throughout our nation for the sake of peace among people, that we might build on the moments of the past when we have stood together, that we might meet every hateful attack with courageous solidarity, and that we might commit to the kind of work that will keep us all safe, valued, and never alone. Holy One of Blessing, may we who call God many different names and those who do not call to God at all, proudly express our differences in this diverse nation, devote ourselves to understanding and protecting our neighbors, and may we see the divine in the eyes of every human being. For the sake of peace among people, may we strive for the day when, in the words of our prophet Micah, we may sit in safety beneath our own vine and fig tree, that none shall make us afraid. Amen.

[applause]

**0:28:58.0 Reverend Luis A. Cortés, Jr.:** Buenos días.

**0:29:01.4 :** Buenos días.

**0:29:01.4** Reverend Luis A. Cortés, Jr.: Religious liberty is one of the defining principles of my Baptist faith. The freedom to believe, to worship, to live according to one's conscience is protected by the First Amendment of our Constitution, which prohibits the establishment of a national religion and protects the free exercise of religion. These protections recognize a fundamental truth, matters of faith are too sacred to be personal and to be controlled by government. The idea of freedom of conscience has deep roots in both scripture and American history. In Joshua 24:15, the people of Israel were challenged, "Choose this day whom you will serve." The call to follow God is presented as a choice rather than a command enforced by political authority. Likewise, Jesus taught, "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." These words establish an important distinction between the responsibilities of government and the authority of God over our human souls. Throughout history, many nations joined religious and political power. While it was intended to create unity, such arrangements frequently resulted in persecution, discrimination, and the suppression of dissent. Individuals who held different beliefs were often denied the freedom to worship according to their convictions.

**0:30:38.1** Reverend Luis A. Cortés, Jr.: The American founders sought a different path. They drew upon various religious, philosophical, and political traditions, including strong advocacy of Baptists and other dissenting groups. They established a constitutional framework that protected the religious liberty of all citizens. Freedom of conscience is not simply the right to worship. It is the right to seek truth, to hold sincere convictions, and to practice your faith without coercion from the state. It protects people of every faith tradition as well as those who profess no faith at all. In a diverse society, religious liberty creates space for peaceful coexistence while preserving the dignity of the individual. The dangers of a state religion remain as relevant today as they did in the past. When government favors one faith above others, both religion and liberty suffer. Faith can become a tool of political power, and those outside of favored traditions can lose equal standing in society. Religious conviction is strongest when it is freely chosen, not politically imposed. For this reason, freedom of faith and conscience remains one of America's greatest safeguards of liberty. A free society depends upon protecting the right of every person to respond to God according to the dictates of their conscience, free from coercion and secure in the protections of the Constitution. Thank you.

[applause]

**0:32:26.8** Reverend Luis A. Cortés, Jr.: It is my pleasure to introduce Archbishop of Philadelphia, Nelson Pérez.

[applause]

**0:32:38.7** Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez: Today is one day of great, great joy. On behalf of the Catholic Church of Philadelphia region and all her people, I'm honored, honored to express profound gratitude as the Liberty Medal is conferred on Pope Leo XIV. This honor is a fitting recognition of the Holy Father's longstanding dedication to advancing liberty for all people throughout the world, particularly the gift of religious freedom. His work as a priest, a bishop, a cardinal, and now shepherd of the universal church has always focused on uplifting the inherent dignity of all people and building pathways to peace. Philly is proud that the Pope is a graduate of Villanova University who spent time living and working in our region. Pope Leo knows us, and we

feel like we know him too. His influence, however, extends beyond Philadelphia. He shepherds a billion Catholics globally. The Holy Father is a world leader who places himself at the service of all humanity. He's gentle, humble, and kind. He's also a man of deep faith and extraordinary intellectual ability who understands the rich diversity of the global community and the complex challenges our world faces. Pope Leo is a true gift to everyone. His papacy, just over a year old, has already been marked by a desire for genuine encounter with all people and filled with the compassionate love of Jesus Christ.

**0:34:26.7 Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez:** That love unconditionally embraces the stranger, the immigrant, the poor, the sick, the unhoused, those struggling with addiction, and all those in need. It does so without discrimination. That's a more beautiful than ideal. It's a mission to which we are all called. When we fulfill it, we lift barriers preventing our brothers and sisters from experiencing the fruits of freedom and liberty. Our nation was born here in Philadelphia 250 years ago. Today, we are especially mindful of the revolutionary vision that gave rise to the United States of America. Our founding fathers recognized that true freedom stems from defending dignity and the value of every human being. We share a common responsibility to further that vision. Let us embrace that responsibility with happy hearts. As the Holy Father expressed so eloquently in his recent encyclical, *Magnificat Humanitas*, which I encourage all to read and reflect upon, created for relationship, every human person is planned and willed by God to enter into communion with him, with others, and with creation. Human dignity does not depend on a person's ability or wealth or position in life, nor on the right or wrong choices made. Instead, it is a gift, a gift that precedes and transcends each person, endowed by God as an expression of his unfailing love. The National Constitution Center serves as a beacon of hope by promoting the importance of the Constitution's ideals for all to benefit and call America home. We are overjoyed in its decision to recognize Pope Leo XIV's work with the Liberty Medal. May we follow the Holy Father's example and work to bring peace to our families, our communities, our world, our own hearts. And yes, may God bless you all, and God bless America. [0:36:57.8] \_\_\_\_ Muchas gracias.

[applause]

**0:37:11.1 Vince Stango:** Thank you, Archbishop Pérez. Our next speaker leads the Commonwealth where William Penn established a bold vision of religious liberty, welcoming people of different faiths to live together in peace and helping lay the foundation for one of America's most enduring ideals. Governor Josh Shapiro has championed Pennsylvania's and Philadelphia's central role in America's 250th anniversary, helping showcase the Commonwealth's remarkable history to the nation and to the world. Please join me in welcoming the Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Josh Shapiro.

[applause]

**0:37:54.5 Governor Josh Shapiro:** Good morning, Philadelphia.

**0:37:58.0 :** Good morning.

**0:37:59.0 Governor Josh Shapiro:** Vince, thank you for not just the kind introduction. Thank you for your strong leadership here at one of the most important institutions in the United States of

America, the National Constitution Center. I want to thank our history-making mayor and my friend, Mayor Parker, for her strong leadership every day, but particularly as the world's eyes focus on the city of Philadelphia. To our elected leaders, to our faith leaders, thank you for being here today. It is fitting that we gather here at the National Constitution Center, a place that celebrates our collective rights and our individual freedoms, with leaders from all different backgrounds and faith traditions coming together to recognize a religious leader who has made an extraordinary impact on our world. Someone who has devoted his life to religious liberty and done so much to protect that freedom, not just for people of the Catholic faith, but for people all across the globe. It was here in Pennsylvania, as Vince noted, just a few miles down the Delaware River, that our founder, William Penn, set out to establish our Commonwealth as one of the few places at the time that would be warm and welcoming to people of all different faiths.

**0:39:37.9 Governor Josh Shapiro:** A place that would be defined by individual freedom, most notably the freedom to worship as you wish. A century later, 250 years ago tomorrow, our founding fathers gathered just across the way to declare their independence from a king and to build on the foundation of individual liberty that Penn laid right here in Pennsylvania, declaring not just their independence, but that each of us have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. About a decade later, their independence won, delegates from across our new nation gathered in that very same room, the old Pennsylvania State House, to draft, to debate, and to sign the new US Constitution and subsequently the Bill of Rights. In drafting the Constitution, they made sure that the very first amendment would protect the freedom of religion for all Americans. You see, religious liberty has been a foundational value for Pennsylvania and for our nation since the very beginning. And that remains the case today. Two and a half centuries later, I'm proud to be here today as your governor, as a man of faith, to recommit ourselves to the cause of religious freedom and to recognize His Holiness Pope Leo XIV for his extraordinary leadership.

**0:41:27.0 Governor Josh Shapiro:** As the first American pope and someone who we all know and feel proud to know was educated here in Pennsylvania, in the Augustinian tradition of Villanova University, Pope Leo has consistently used his powerful platform on the world stage to assert that religious freedom is an essential right for all people. He has reaffirmed the dignity of every human being, no matter how they choose to worship. On behalf of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the cradle of liberty and the birthplace of our democracy, thank you, Pope Leo, for using your voice and your power to advance religious liberty for all people. My own faith calls me to service. My faith teaches me that no one is required to complete the task, but neither are we free to refrain from it. To me, that is universal. And it means that each of us has a responsibility to get off the sidelines, to get in the game, and to do our part to serve others and work to advance the cause of freedom. And I believe that work is needed, especially at this particular moment in time. Pope Leo throughout his life has exemplified that spirit of service from his days at Villanova to his days now at the Vatican, caring for our neighbors around the world and standing up for the freedom our founding fathers fought for 250 years ago. So, as we celebrate the 250th July 4th of our independence and the freedoms that our founders fought for with the example laid by William Penn, we are proud to honor Pope Leo XIV and his work to protect religious liberty across the world. Thank you for your leadership and the example you set every day. May God watch over and bless Pope Leo XIV. May God watch over and bless the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. And may God watch over and bless the greatest country on the face of the earth, the United States of America and all of its inhabitants. Thank you.

[applause]

**0:44:15.8 Vince Stango:** Thank you, Governor Shapiro. Earlier this spring, I had the extraordinary privilege of traveling to the Vatican with the delegation from the National Constitution Center, including Archbishop Pérez, to present the 2026 Liberty Medal to His Holiness, Pope Leo XIV. It was a remarkable trip. We came as a multi-faith group of civic leaders representing an institution grounded in the American constitutional tradition and committed to advancing civil dialogue across differences. In that setting, the principles at the heart of our work, freedom of conscience, human dignity, and the responsibilities of self-government, felt both deeply American and broadly shared across traditions. But before we hear directly from His Holiness, I'd like to share a brief look back at that unforgettable day at the Vatican.

[music]

**0:45:53.1 Vince Stango:** Picked these out for us, a scarf. This... And I think maybe you already have one of these, I don't know. [laughter] But also maybe something you'll actually wear.

**0:46:07.2 His Holiness Pope Leo XIV:** Oh, I use this when I play tennis. Yeah.

[laughter]

**0:46:13.2 Vince Stango:** And then to represent the work of the Constitution Center, this is a copy of the Acts passed at the first Congress, George Washington's copy with his notes. Something that really connects why we're giving this award to you.

**0:46:25.7 His Holiness Pope Leo XIV:** Look who's here. [laughter] Oh. [laughter] You can put them off camera or there.

**0:46:33.8 Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez:** Yeah, wherever you want them to be.

[music]

**0:46:25.5 Mike George:** From Chicago to Villanova, from the missions of Palermo to the chair of St. Peter, you have dedicated your life in pursuit of human dignity, underscoring the vital role of religious liberty, of freedom of conscience. And so, it is our great honor to be with you today. We are so humbled to be able to share with you this wonderful recognition. Thank you.

**0:47:11.5 His Holiness Pope Leo XIV:** You're welcome.

**0:47:10.4 Vince Stango:** Holy Father, on behalf of all of us at the National Constitution Center, it is my great honor to present to you the 2026 Liberty Medal in recognition for your lifelong commitment to religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

[music]

**0:47:25.1 His Holiness Pope Leo XIV:** I would just like to recall the words signed by the founding fathers of the nation 250 years ago in Philadelphia in the Declaration of Independence when they

said, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men have received fundamental rights from our Creator, and they include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." May those values continue to inspire all of us in the United States and throughout the world. And together, hopefully we can all work that those freedoms will indeed be a part of the lives of all people everywhere. Thank you very much for this sign. I am sincerely honored and deeply humbled by this award. So thank you very much.

**0:48:17.5 Vince Stango:** You're welcome.

[music]

**0:48:22.0 Vince Stango:** Thank you. Today, we honor Pope Leo XIV because his ministry has embodied the values at the heart of the Liberty Medal. A deep respect for the dignity of every person, a commitment to freedom of conscience, and a belief that faith can be a force for civic renewal. As America commemorates the 250th anniversary of its founding, it is especially meaningful that His Holiness joins us live from the Vatican to address the American people. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great honor to introduce the 2026 Liberty Medal recipient, His Holiness, Pope Leo XIV.

[applause]

**0:49:45.3 His Holiness Pope Leo XIV:** Thank you very much. Dear friends, I am honored to accept the Liberty Medal of the National Constitution Center in this year that marks the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States of America with the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776. On the eve of this momentous occasion, I offer a warm greeting to all those assembled at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. As a son of this great country, founded by courageous men and women who dreamed of liberty and of a better life for themselves and for their children, I join you in asking God's blessings upon America's future, that the lofty ideals enshrined at the beginning of the Declaration of Independence may continue to guide the flourishing of the nation in unity, justice, and peace. From our youth, most of us have admired the eloquence of those words with their resounding appeal to the law of nature and to nature's God as the basis of their assertion that all men and women are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, including the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. While couched in the language of the Enlightenment, that claim is ultimately grounded in an understanding of the human person, inspired by the great biblical vision of man and woman being created in the divine image.

**0:51:37.1 His Holiness Pope Leo XIV:** It is indeed here that we discover the basis of human dignity, dignity which precedes the establishment of any state and whose custody constitutes its very purpose. In these past 250 years, for so many peoples throughout the world, it was the firm resolve to achieve the noble vision of the nation's founders that made America a byword for freedom. As the country opened its doors to successive waves of immigrants, enabling them and their children to play their part in shaping the future of the nation. It was this same love of freedom that inspired the United States in the darkest hours of the last century, at the time of the two world wars, to look beyond itself and at great sacrifice to champion the cause of freedom beyond its own borders. As every American knows, however, the path to building a society that would embody

those high ideals of liberty and justice for all was not always easy and in many respects is still a work in progress. Indeed, the effort to realize this vision is one that must be taken up anew in each generation and in the face of ever new challenges. Today, as we look to the future, this historic anniversary presents us with the opportunity to reflect once again on the nation's founding principles in the hope that America will remain ever true to the dream that has earned it the title of land of the free and home of the brave.

**0:53:26.5 His Holiness Pope Leo XIV:** The first right enshrined by the nation's founders was the right to life, for no one who is deprived of life can enjoy liberty or pursue happiness. A country's vitality is deeply tied to the value it affords to human life in every form and condition, acknowledging the dignity endowed upon every human person by virtue of their very existence. The inherent worth of every human life has led the noble hearts of generations to praise the marvellous works of the creator and stand in reverence before so precious a gift. Indeed, it is precisely this reverence that we must continue to cultivate, one that sways the hearts of individuals and inspires laws that recognize and safeguard the gift from the moment of conception to natural death. Reverence, too, will aid us in discovering that we are guardians and stewards of those entrusted to our care. In this regard, the moral greatness of a nation is manifested above all in its capacity to support, protect, and cherish the lives of all, especially the most vulnerable and those whose worth is questioned. Following the right to life, liberty was and is preeminent among the principles revered by the men and women who have sought within this nation's borders a new beginning, often equating it with previously undreamed of hope.

**0:55:01.9 His Holiness Pope Leo XIV:** Though frequently understood as the ability to act as one would like, authentic freedom runs much deeper. It is founded upon the human person's capacity to know the truth and adhere to what is good, even at great cost, a sacrifice well known to many who have labored to shape this country. The desire for truth and freedom, as well as the very pursuit of happiness, continues to inspire people of all generations to ask fundamental questions regarding the meaning of life, our ultimate purpose, and indeed about God. And it is proper for magnanimous hearts to endeavor to answer these questions with sincerity. These answers inevitably determine the direction which we seek to give to our lives. And America has long championed the religious freedom necessary to follow responsibly the dictates of conscience in this regard, free from fear and coercion, as enshrined in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. It is this freedom that holds sacred the inner sphere of the person where convictions are formed and where conscience can guide the decisions made in the intimacy of the human heart. This same freedom also ensures the right of every person to worship according to one's own belief, and of individuals, communities, and associations to give public expression to their faith.

**0:56:37.8 His Holiness Pope Leo XIV:** In fact, religious freedom gave rise to the American tradition of allowing for interfaith dialogue and interreligious cooperation in promoting the public good and enriching the debates on the great moral and ethical issues that have faced the nation and shaped the course of its history. It is my hope that this tradition will continue to bear fruit in a public discourse marked by moderation, respect for the views of others, and an ongoing effort to find common ground in promoting the cause of peace and reconciliation at home and abroad. The forebearers of this country, men and women of diverse backgrounds, religions, and languages, were able to find that common ground and the strength necessary to pursue a better future. The principles that inspired America's founders, rooted as they are in the truth of the human person, brought them

together in a single cause, a common dream. Unity lent strength to that dream, giving rise under God to the United States of America. E pluribus unum, out of many, one. In order for a nation to flourish, it must be truly united. United not by goals bound to momentary endeavors, but by ideals that do not fade with the passing of time.

**0:58:11.5 His Holiness Pope Leo XIV:** May the principles we have reflected upon today, a shared human dignity, equality, and the rights laid out in the Declaration of Independence, ever be a source of such unity and a guiding light for the present moment and for the years to come. In accepting this award, I therefore pray that this, the 250th anniversary of the founding of this great nation, may be the occasion of a solemn recommitment to these ideals that have made America a country that values peace and prosperity, a country characterized by generosity and nobility of heart. I commend all of you, as well as the future of the nation, to the one who is himself the source of true freedom and lasting peace, the one whose very name is peace. May God bless America. Thank you.

[applause]

**0:59:54.2 Vince Stango:** Your Holiness, thank you for those inspiring words. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, our Board of Trustees, and everyone gathered here on Independence Mall and watching around the world, congratulations on receiving the 2026 Liberty Medal.

[applause]

**1:00:20.9 Vince Stango:** Today has been more than a ceremony. It has been a powerful reminder of what is possible. Here, where our nation's founding ideals first took written form, we have heard voices from many faith traditions joined in mutual respect. We have heard a message of unity from the first US-born pope, and we have witnessed one of the enduring strengths of the American experiment, people of different beliefs standing together, honoring both our differences and our shared humanity. Freedom of conscience does more than protect our individual beliefs. It has been one of the great engines of the American experiment, empowering generation after generation to call our nation to live more fully up to its highest ideals. It is what makes moments like this possible and is what will carry the American experiment forward into its next 250 years. This is now our responsibility. We close today's ceremony with one of our nation's most beloved hymns, America the Beautiful. It is more than a celebration of our country. It's a vision of the nation we are still called to build. Let us work together to ensure America is always as beautiful in character as it is in its promise. It is now my pleasure to welcome the Cathedral Basilica Choir and the Archdiocesan Choir of Philadelphia to perform America the Beautiful. The lyrics can be found in your event program if you'd like to join us in song.

[music]

[applause]

**1:05:53.4 Speaker 1:** Thank you for attending the 2026 Liberty Medal Ceremony in honor of His Holiness, Pope Leo XIV. And please enjoy Philadelphia's celebration of the 250th year of this nation.