Pope's Argentina Visit Puts Austerity on the Spot

Pope Leo XIV's first speech in Argentina challenged President Javier Milei's case for deep spending cuts.



An empty meeting table holds a calculator and a loaf of bread, symbolizing a debate between economic policy and everyday needs.

Pope Leo XIV arrived in Argentina on Sunday and used his first public speech there to challenge the way political leaders measure success: not only by economic numbers, but by what happens to people living under those policies. According to Associated Press reporting published by PBS NewsHour, the pope's message was aimed at a country led by President Javier Milei, whose government has made deep public spending cuts the center of its plan to repair Argentina's economy.

The visit matters because it turns a policy argument into a public moral argument. Milei says Argentina needs a smaller government and harsh budget discipline to stop **inflation**, which is the rise in prices over time. His critics say those same policies are making daily life harder for workers, retirees, and families already under pressure. Pope Leo did not name every policy fight directly, but he told officials, diplomats, and civic leaders that "The economy must serve the person, not the person the economy."

Milei describes himself as an anarcho-capitalist, a label for someone who wants a radically limited state and a much freer market. Since taking office in late 2023, he has pushed **austerity**, meaning sharp cuts in government spending meant to reduce deficits and stabilize public finances. His government argues that these cuts are necessary to tame Argentina's long-running economic crisis, reduce waste and fraud, and put the country on a more sustainable path.

There is evidence Milei can point to. The AP reported that his austerity drive has produced a rare budget **surplus**, meaning the government is taking in more money than it spends. Annual inflation has fallen from 200% to about 32%. For supporters, those numbers suggest that Argentina is beginning to regain control after years of instability. From that view, short-term pain may be the cost of avoiding a worse collapse later.

But the pope's speech highlighted the other side of the ledger. The AP reported that real **wages**, meaning wages adjusted for the effect of rising prices, remain lower than when Milei took office. About 300,000 formal jobs have disappeared. Retirees have protested outside Congress every Wednesday for more than two years, saying an average monthly **pension** of $510 is not enough to afford medicine. For critics of austerity, a budget can look healthier while people's lives become more fragile.

Leo's argument came from the Catholic Church's social doctrine, a body of teaching about work, **poverty**, human **dignity**, and the responsibilities of society. He did not reject markets altogether. In fact, he urged Argentina to encourage activity that

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creates opportunity and stimulates private initiative. But he said economic growth should also reach people who are disadvantaged, including the unemployed, retirees, and those who work but still struggle to cover household needs.

That balance is the contested heart of the story. One side argues that without discipline, Argentina cannot fix inflation or rebuild confidence. The other argues that if **reform** leaves too many people unable to afford basic needs, then the cure may damage the society it claims to save. The disagreement is not simply whether the economy matters. It is about what counts as success and who should bear the cost while a country tries to recover.

The setting made the message sharper. This was the first papal visit to Argentina in nearly 40 years. It was also politically delicate because Argentina was the homeland of Pope Francis, who led the church before Leo and never returned home during his 12-year papacy. Milei had once used harsh language against Francis, but on Sunday he praised him as an exceptional Argentine figure whose teachings still matter. Milei also welcomed people from across Argentina's political spectrum and said some occasions go beyond political differences.

Leo, for his part, also spoke about political language. He called for gentler politics in a polarized country and said **democracy** depends on careful words and on seeing opponents as fellow citizens with a shared future. That point was also a contrast with Milei's combative public style. The AP noted that Milei frequently attacks critics on social media and has lost some political support and allies in Congress.

The visit does not settle Argentina's economic debate. The pope does not run the Argentine government, and Milei remains an elected president with his own program. But the speech forced two kinds of authority into the same room: elected power focused on economic repair, and religious authority focused on human dignity and social responsibility. The question Argentina faces is not only whether austerity can improve the numbers. It is whether a country can ask people to endure sacrifice while still convincing them they are being protected, not merely counted.

Written from reporting by PBS NewsHour.

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THINK IT THROUGH

1. When a country is in economic crisis, how should leaders weigh quick improvements in national indicators against hardship for vulnerable groups?

2. Should a religious leader publicly challenge an elected government's economic policies, or does that cross a line in democratic politics?

3. What information would you still need to judge whether Milei's austerity program is working fairly?

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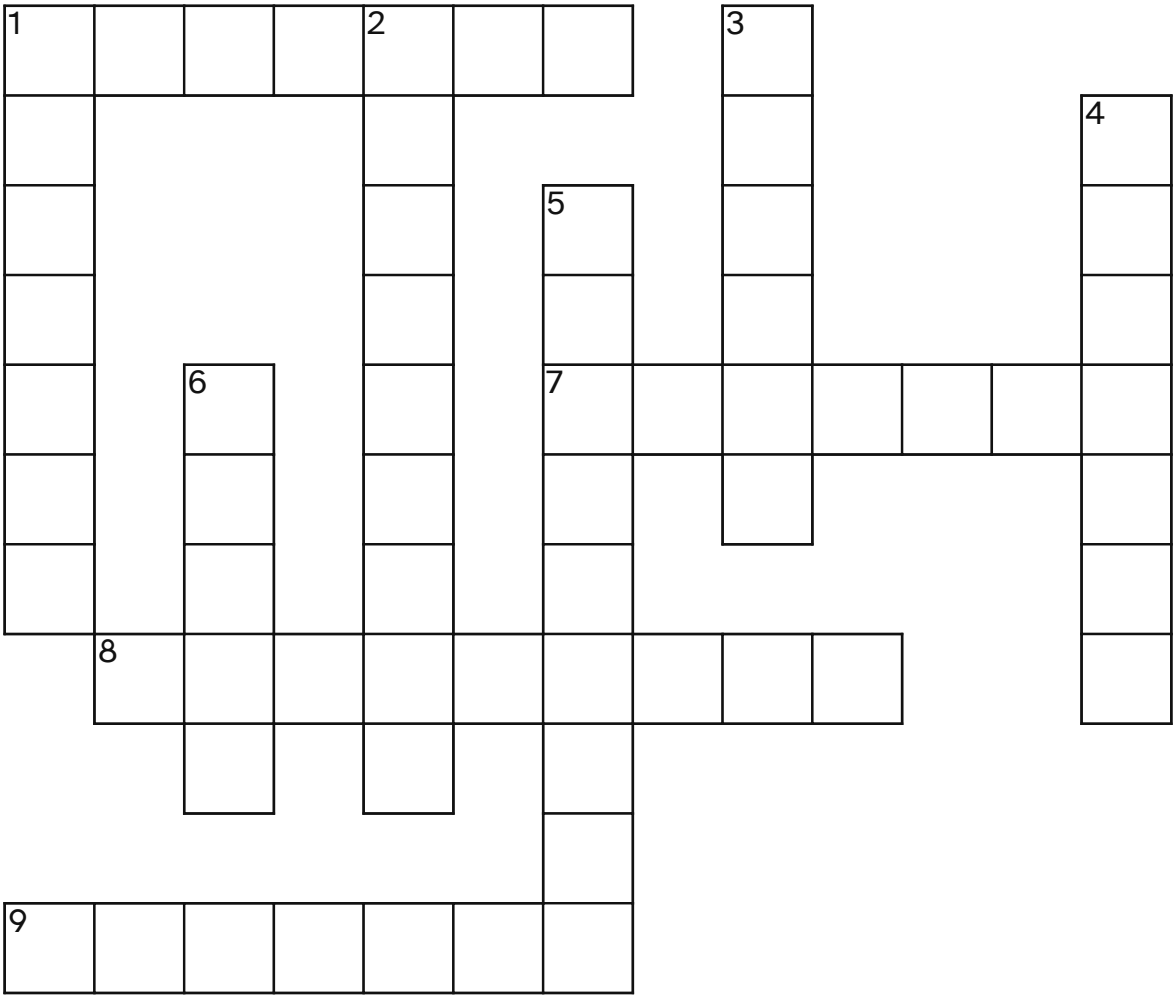
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AUSTERITY DEFICIT DEMOCRACY DIGNITY INFLATION
PENSION POVERTY REFORM SURPLUS WAGES

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ACROSS

1 Worth and respect owed to every person

7 When government takes in more money than it spends

8 Government where citizens elect their leaders

9 Lack of resources for basic needs

DOWN

1 Gap when government spending exceeds its income

2 Ongoing price increases that weaken buying power

3 Change meant to improve a law or institution

4 Regular retirement payment after leaving a job

5 Government strategy of deep cuts to public spending

6 Pay earned for work performed

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Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

PBS NewsHour

"Pope Leo arrives in Argentina and tells Milei that people, not the economy, should come first"

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https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/pope-arrives-in-argentina-and-tells-milei-that-people-not-the-economy-should-come-first

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