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FILE - People attend the World Youth Day's closing Mass celebrated by Pope Francis on the Copacabana beachfront, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on July 28, 2013. (AP/Felipe Dana)

by Associated Press

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DILI, East Timor — September 11, 2024

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Popes are popular. So much so that nearly half the population of East Timor gathered Tuesday in a seaside park for [Pope Francis' final Mass](#) in the small

Southeast Asian country whose people are deeply Catholic.

Other papal Masses have drawn millions of people in more populous countries, such as the Philippines, Brazil and Poland. But the estimated crowd of 600,000 people in East Timor was believed to represent the biggest turnout for a papal event ever in terms of the proportion of the population.

East Timor, also known as Timor-Leste, has been overwhelmingly Catholic ever since Portuguese explorers first arrived in the early 1500s and some 97% of the population today is Catholic. They turned out in droves to welcome the first pope to visit them since [their independence in 2002](#), on the same field where St. John Paul II prayed in 1989 during the nation's fight to separate from Indonesia.

While the East Timor gathering stands out, experts caution against relying on crowd counts that cannot be independently verified. The Vatican communicates crowd estimates that come from local organizers — who have an interest in overestimating the popularity of the head of the Roman Catholic Church.

Still, there's no doubt that popes can pack a room — or a park. Here's a look at [other popular papal Masses](#):

Philippines

Pope Francis' Mass in Manila drew [an estimated 6 million people](#) — a record that still stands more than a decade later — to Rizal Park and surrounding areas in 2015.

The faithful poured into Manila's rain-soaked streets and the city's biggest park as the pope ended his Asian pilgrimage with an appeal for Filipinos to protect their young from sin and vice so they can become missionaries of the faith. A sea of humanity in colorful rain ponchos spread out across the parkland and nearby boulevards, lining the motorcade route.

A Vatican spokesman said the Holy See had received the 6 million figure officially from local authorities and it had surpassed the record of 5 million people who turned out for then-Pope John Paul II's final Mass in the same park in 1995. He was declared a saint in an unprecedented fast-tracked Vatican ceremony in 2014.

Rio's Copacabana Beach

Vatican and Brazilian officials said [3.7 million people gathered on July 28, 2013](#), to see Pope Francis celebrate World Youth Day on the iconic Copacabana beach in the world's biggest Catholic country. But number crunchers disputed the figure, saying the real number was not even half that.

The research director of Datafolha, one of Brazil's top polling and statistic firms, said that based on the size of the crowd area and reasonable density estimates, turnout was [more likely between 1.2 million and 1.5 million people](#).

By the Vatican's count, the crowd density throughout the entire area — about 497,000 square meters (594,400 square yards or 5.3 million square feet) — would have been 7.4 people per square meter, which wouldn't allow for movement of any kind, let alone the jumping, arm-waving, singing and dancing seen at the papal events.

Video and photos of the crowd also showed that while it was packed close to the gigantic altar built on Copacabana beach, the faithful thinned out along the 4-kilometer (2.5-mile) -long beach.

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Poland

In 1979, St. John Paul II returned to his hometown of Krakow for his first visit to Poland after his elevation to the papacy. His Mass drew nearly 2 million people, according to the Polish Catholic news agency KAI, despite pressures from the Soviet-backed regime.

All told, at least 6 million of Poland's 35 million people saw the pontiff along the route of his pilgrimage through multiple cities, including in city squares and open fields across the country. He said his farewell Mass on the outskirts of Krakow in a voice that was hoarse and wavering after nine days of speeches, Masses and other appearances before enthusiastic and adoring crowds.

The 1979 journey to Poland was later credited with helping to bring about the collapse of Communism.

More than 20 years later, the pontiff returned to Krakow. A 2002 open-air Mass there brought an estimated 2.5 million people to see the pope, KAI reported.

Congo

Pope Francis celebrated a Mass for 1 million people in [Kinshasa, the capital of Congo](#), in 2023, at which he urged the country's people to forgive those who committed “inhuman violence” against them.

Roughly half of Congo’s 105 million people are Catholic, according to the Vatican, which also cited local organizers for the estimate of 1 million people in the crowd.

This story appears in the **Francis in Asia and Oceania** feature series. [View the full series](#).