

French youth hikes up mountain with heavy cross on back, installs atop peak.

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In a feat of perseverance and strength, Maël Le Lagadec completed the arduous 14 hour climb to replace the cross that had been knocked down.

By Almudena Martínez-Bordiú. May 22, 2026 at 7:00 AM ET · Updated May 27, 2026 at 10:07 PM ET

“It was an adventure that will remain etched in my memory for a long time,” said young Frenchman Maël Le Lagadec in describing his feat of carrying a wooden cross to the summit of Aneto Peak in the Pyrenees mountains in Spain after the original one had been knocked down. The landscape architecture student hiked upward for 14 hours, carrying on his back a 77-pound walnut cross that he had sculpted following the disappearance of the iron cross that had crowned the summit since 1951. After covering over 17 miles and ascending 6,230 feet with the help of a friend, the 18-year-old managed to reach the highest peak in the Pyrenees, situated at an elevation of 9,840 feet.

Following a report by a group of mountaineers last April, the Spanish Civil Guard confirmed that the original 10-foot cross, weighing 220 pounds, had been toppled and thrown down the slope. The original cross was installed at the summit of Aneto 75 years ago by a hiking club from Catalonia. Subsequently, the Mountaineers of Aragón also placed an image of the Virgin of the Pillar (the patroness of Spain) and a carving of St. Martial, the patron saint of Benasque, the valley within the Aragonese region where the peak is located inside the Posets-Maladeta Nature Park. This symbol of faith, situated atop Spain’s second-highest peak, has been the subject of controversy and various acts of vandalism. In 1999, it was torn from its base by a storm, and more recently, in 2018, it was found painted yellow, a colour associated with the Catalan independence movement. The mayor of the town of Benasque, Manuel Mora, applauded the initiative and stated that the wooden cross would remain until the original is restored. A group called “Movement Towards a Secular State” denounced the installation of the new cross, however, and urged that disciplinary proceedings be opened against Le Lagadec.

For his part, Le Lagadec took to social media to call for an end to the “degradation of this type of heritage,” having documented the entire process from the creation of the cross to its installation atop Aneto. He also recounted that he had the help of several people who encouraged him throughout the entire ascent, recalling a woman who lent him her hiking stick during the most difficult sections.

“Upon reaching the summit, I still struggled to fully grasp what I had just accomplished,” he wrote in one of his posts, calling his feat “an extraordinary human and athletic adventure, culminating in the installation of the cross at the very summit.”

This story was first published by ACI Prensa, the Spanish-language sister service of EWTN News. It has been translated and adapted by EWTN News English.