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U.S.-born Cardinal Robert Prevost, prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops under Pope Francis, leaves the Vatican Synod Hall April 22, 2025, after the first general congregation of the College of Cardinals. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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It is typically absurd to think of an American as pope. But in this conclave, a Chicago-born Augustinian friar who has spent much of his life outside of the United States is worthy of serious consideration.

Cardinal Robert Prevost, 69, heads the influential Vatican Dicastery for Bishops, the office tasked with advising the pope on bishop appointments around the world.

While cardinals have been gathering after the death of Pope Francis, Prevost's star appears to be rising as Cardinal Pietro Parolin's candidacy seems in trouble. Prevost could become the candidate for those seeking a curial insider who is not Parolin, after the Vatican secretary of state's lackluster homily on Sunday raised concerns about a charisma gap.

Some cardinals already had their eye on Prevost because of his global experience. Though he may be American by birth, he has spent only a third of his life in the United States, instead spending much of the rest of it in Europe and Latin America.

He's only been in charge for two years, taking over from Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, who held the post for 15 years and helped leave a conservative imprint on the Catholic hierarchy.

"We are often worried about teaching doctrine, but we risk forgetting that our first duty is to communicate the beauty and joy of knowing Jesus," Prevost, in one of his few interviews, told Vatican News, the news portal of the Holy See.

It was a clear signal that the tides were turning in a new pastoral direction and that an office that once was concerned with using doctrine as a litmus test was rebalancing its priorities in identifying candidates for episcopacy. Like Pope Francis, Prevost was interested in selecting potential bishops who adopted a "pastors first" approach to church leadership.

Born in Chicago in 1955, Prevost holds degrees from Villanova University in Pennsylvania, Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and the Pontifical University of

St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome.

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In 1985, Prevost joined the Augustinian mission in Peru in 1985, becoming part of the religious order inspired by St. Augustine that seeks to find a balance of "love and learning." Augustinian friars lead semi-monastic lives and are engaged in a range of pursuits, such as education or prison work.

At age 30, Prevost went to work in Peru, serving there until 1999, with a brief stint back in Chicago in 1987 to work as pastor for vocations and director of missions for its Augustinian province.

During his early years in Peru, Prevost wore a number of hats, including teaching in the diocesan seminary, serving as judge in a church court and leading a parish on the outskirts of the city of Trujillo.

In 1999, Prevost was elected the head of the Augustinians' Chicago-based province. And then in 2001, he tapped as prior general of the worldwide order, which he led until 2013. During that time, he was based in Rome but spent most of his time on the road and in the air, visiting the nearly 50 countries where the Augustinian order is present.

In 2014, Francis sent him back into the mission field, naming him bishop of Chiclayo, in northern Peru, where he served until the pope called him to Rome again for full-time service in the Roman Curia in 2023.

Here in Rome, Prevost enjoys a reputation for industriousness, spending as much time working to identify new bishops as he does in dealing with problem cases — such as that of Bishop Joseph Strickland, who was head of the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, until he was removed from his post in 2023.

Prevost brings to the table pastoral experience in the peripheries with expertise in navigating the complexities of the church's central governance — a rare combination for those seeking a potential pope who shares the priorities of Francis with a greater prioritization on governance.



Chicago-born Cardinal Robert Prevost arrives in the Paul VI Audience Hall to attend a morning session of the synod on synodality at the Vatican Oct. 21, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Prevost has been a vocal proponent of Francis' emphasis on synodality, which has emerged the first week of general congregations as an important issue to a significant bloc of cardinals who can vote in the conclave.

In the 2023 Vatican News interview, Prevost connects synodality — efforts to make the church's structures more inclusive and participatory — to addressing the current polarization currently gripping the church.

Another plus on his resume: His background in canon law might provide some comfort to synod skeptics who are concerned that it could pose threats to the church's tradition.

Prevost has another edge: He is a polyglot who speaks English, Spanish, Italian, French and Portuguese and can read Latin and German, giving him abilities to

communicate with his fellow cardinals in ways that others cannot.

The language ability, his international travel experience as head of his religious order, and his work in identifying Latin-rite bishops around the world mean that he will be among the best-known candidates going into this conclave.

While fluent in languages, he is not garrulous. When he speaks, he does so with caution and great deliberation. A private man with a reserved style, he will not score high on the charm offensive. But his steely determination and clarity might comfort those looking for a leader who knows where he wants to go and how to get there.

Those elements could put him over the top, even if cardinals are reluctant to vote for an American.

This is part of a series on the leading candidates in the 2025 papal election. The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

This story appears in the **Papal front-runners: The men who could be pope** and **Who will be the next pope?** feature series.