Opinion
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Newly elected Pope Leo XIV appears at the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican May 8, 2025. (AP/Markus Schreiber)



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The first American pope! So many people thought holding a U.S. passport was an insuperable barrier to the election of Augustinian Cardinal Robert Prevost as Pope Leo XIV, but the College of Cardinals thought differently.

Prevost was the least American among the American cardinals, having spent most of his ministry as a priest and bishop in Peru, and in Rome as the general of the Augustinian order. The cardinals clearly wanted someone committed to Pope Francis' reform agenda and someone with a demonstrated record for effective management.

As prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops for the past two years, Prevost would have spoken with many of the world's cardinals as he prepared the dossiers from which Francis selected most of the world's bishops. In addition, when he served as general of the Augustinians, Prevost traveled the world visiting the order's various provinces and missions.

His leadership potential is most obvious, however, from his work in Peru earlier in his career. Augustinian Fr. Anthony Pizzo, prior provincial of the Midwestern Augustinians, has known Prevost since 1974, when Pizzo was a year behind the future pope at Villanova University.

In a phone interview before the conclave began, Pizzo told me that Prevost "was sent to our missions in Peru — in the upper northwest part of the country. These were missions of the Midwestern province of the order, the Province of Our Mother of Good Counsel. We started the missions, known as the Chulucanas missions, after the [Second Vatican] Council. Prevost worked with Bishop [Juan Conway] McNabb who led the prelature there."

Prevost "became director of formation. All the leaders in those missions are now native Peruvian Augustinians, and he was critical in the effort to recruit native vocations and cultivate native priests for leadership in the order," Pizzo told NCR. "And he succeeded."

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Pope Leo XIV, like Francis, was shaped by the reception of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council in Latin America. There, the bishops embraced the synodal style that Francis would bring to the universal church.

The Council of Episcopal Conferences in Latin America, known by its acronym CELAM, was actually formed before the Second Vatican Council, in 1955, but its post-conciliar meetings developed a degree of collegial discernment and decision-making that was unique in the world. Francis brought this more collegial style to the universal church with the twin synods on synodality held in 2023 and 2024.

The focus, as well as the style of governance, of Latin American bishops also has been clear in the post-conciliar era: They never stopped asking what it means to exercise a preferential option for the poor. In the face of widespread and acute poverty, they refined the Gospel's implications for a just society into a more or less coherent theology. They abandoned some of the coarser theories once grouped under the heading "liberation theology" for a more homegrown theology of the people that eschewed the faulty anthropology, materialist assumptions and Hegelian dialectical theory that characterized too much of liberation theology.

By the time Prevost became a bishop the fights over liberation theology had receded, but the question persisted: What does it mean to exercise a preferential option for the poor?

As the cardinals discussed the future of the church last week, the happy shadow of Francis loomed large. They wanted someone who shared his commitment to synodality and focus on the world's poor. With Prevost, a mild-mannered man, they also voted for fewer surprises and a steadier hand at the wheel of governance, someone with experience of the Vatican Curia but not a creature of that Curia.

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The wealthy and well-organized conservative critics of Francis will be disappointed. Good. The new pope is not someone who will be seduced by their financial power. U.S. conservatives who disagreed with Francis would often cite the parochialism of his Argentine background and, especially, what they considered his Peronist streak. They said he misunderstood the U.S. That dog will no longer hunt.

In the pre-conclave chatter, there was concern that Prevost lacked the charisma of Francis. But you have a hard time finding a photo of Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio smiling when he was archbishop in Buenos Aires. He was transformed by his election. In 2005, after Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected as Pope Benedict XVI, a bishop told me, "Remember, Cardinal Ratzinger and Pope Benedict are different realities." Sure enough, we soon saw photos of Benedict kissing babies. The previous 25 years, he had a desk job.

Who knows how Pope Leo XIV will play on the world stage. For now we can only state, but state with certainty, that the cardinals have chosen someone committed to the reforms Pope Francis began. The new pope will chart his own path, to be sure, but we know the direction in which he is headed.

This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** feature series. View the full series.