Vatican
Vatican News



Andrea Gallardo, 20, from Texas, wears a flag of the United States after Pope Leo XIV appeared on the balcony of St Peter's Basilica following his election, at the Vatican, on May 8, 2025. (AP photo/Paolo Santalucia)



by Camillo Barone

NCR staff reporter

View Author Profile
cbarone@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — May 8, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As the bells of St. Peter's Basilica tolled, signaling the election of a new pope, American Catholics gathered in Rome expressed both surprise and hope for the future of the church.

Among them was Lucy Wade, a 20-year-old from Kansas City, Missouri, who was in awe of the historic moment.

"I did not expect this," Wade said, her eyes fixed on the crowds flooding St. Peter's Square.

She said she didn't know a lot about each of the front-runners for the pope, but said "it's very exciting that he's an American." Pope Leo XIV, the former Cardinal Robert Prevost, is the first American pope in the history of the Roman Catholic Church.

"I'm looking forward to finding out more about what he's done in the past and his mission going forward in the coming days," she told the National Catholic Reporter.

For Wade, the election of an American pope was more than just a political shift but a chance for the church to extend its reach and compassion. "I really hope that the church can become more accepting to those outside the church, and accepting people with differences," she said, adding that people should focus on loving their neighbors and spreading unity and love "despite our differences."



Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, who has chosen the papal name Leo XIV, waves to the crowd on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican May 8, 2025, following his election during the conclave. He is the first American pope in history. (OSV News/Reuters/Stoyan Nenov)

Standing alongside Wade was Owen McSpadd, a 21-year-old from Dallas, currently studying abroad in Rome. For McSpadd, witnessing the papal election firsthand during a Jubilee Year was nothing short of surreal. "It's a surreal feeling to be able to be here not only on Jubilee, but also to see this whole process and an American pope," he shared, adding his hopes for a positive global impact.

McSpadd, who has watched the papal election unfold, expressed optimism that the new pope could serve as a moral beacon — not just for Catholics, but for America as well. "I just hope that he's a good representative. You know, a better representative of America than our, you know, some of our politicians," he said.

"But hopefully this can set some light in America."

As the two young Americans watched the celebration continue, their hopes underscored the significance of the moment — not just for Catholics, but for a world seeking compassion and change.



Men wave a U.S. flag as Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, who has chosen the papal name Leo XIV, appears on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican May 8, 2025, following his election during the conclave. He is the first pope from the United States in history. (OSV News/Reuters/Eloisa Lopez)

Megan Schultz, a 34-year-old nurse from Chicago, held her rosary tightly as she spoke. "I flew here the moment I heard the conclave was happening," she said. "I just had this feeling that something big was going to happen. An American pope ... I'm praying he brings a spirit of renewal. We need healing, not just in the church but in the world."

For James Callahan, a retired firefighter from Boston, the moment felt personal. "To see an American leading the church now ... it feels like hope. Real hope," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

Advertisement

Beside him stood Emily Navarro, a 26-year-old teacher from San Francisco, currently traveling in Europe. "I didn't plan to be here," she laughed, holding a Vatican flag. "But I'm glad I am. I think this is a chance for the church to really embrace younger generations. We want to be heard."

Thomas Greene, a software engineer from Seattle, expressed optimism for modernization within the church. "I'm hopeful he'll address the real issues — transparency, technology, connecting with people where they are," he said. "We need to move forward, not stay stuck in the past."



Crowds at St Peters Square greet Pope Leo XIV with their phones aloft as he stands on balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, his image appearing on a large screen, May 8 at the Vatican. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

For Maria Lopez, a 42-year-old mother of three from Miami, the election brought tears. "I brought my children all the way here to see this," she said, wiping her eyes. "I want them to witness history, to see that faith matters, that it's alive."

David Chun, a business owner from Long Island, New York, saw the election as a call to unity. "We're divided back home," he noted. "If the pope can help bridge those gaps, maybe there's hope for all of us to do the same."

Katherine Miliband, 29, a doctoral student studying religious studies, saw deeper theological significance. "This is a turning point," she said. "The church has an opportunity to redefine its mission in a way that truly reflects Christ's love."

And finally, Robert Martin, a Vietnam War veteran from Houston, stood with a quiet smile. "I've seen a lot in my life," he said simply. "But I never thought I'd live to see an American pope. Maybe it's time for some good news."



Brennan Hewitt and his mom Kathy Hewitt, Catholics from Philadelphia, hold U.S. flags in St. Peter's Square May 8 at the Vatican. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Brennan Hewitt and his mom Kathy Hewitt never imagined an American pope walking into the balcony.

"We couldn't stop crying," said Kathy Hewitt after hearing who the new pope was. "I'm so moved."

The Catholic son and mom from Philadelphia had wanted to be part of the history of their faith when they decided to extend their vacation after hearing the conclave dates were around the time they were supposed to leave."

> 'I've seen a lot in my life. But I never thought I'd live to see an American pope. Maybe it's time for some good news.'
> —Robert Martin, Vietnam War veteran from Houston
>
> Tweet this

This is so unexpected," said Brennan, who has been studying in Rome since January and had started a vacation with his mom after finishing up a university semester in Rome.

At the plaza facing St. Peter's Basilica the two had been waving two small U.S flags as they waited for a signal of the new pope to come.

"I have no words," said Kathy Hewitt.

Contributing to this story was Rhina Guidos.

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

NCR is an independent nonprofit and relies on support from readers like you, especially at this crucial moment in church history. Please donate here to the Spring Fund Drive.

Read this next: HABEMUS PAPAM: Leo XIV is 1st US pope chosen to lead Catholic Church
This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** feature series. View the full series.