News
Analysis



Pope Leo XIV, the former Cardinal Robert F. Prevost, waves to the crowds in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican after his election as pope May 8, 2025. The new pope was born in Chicago. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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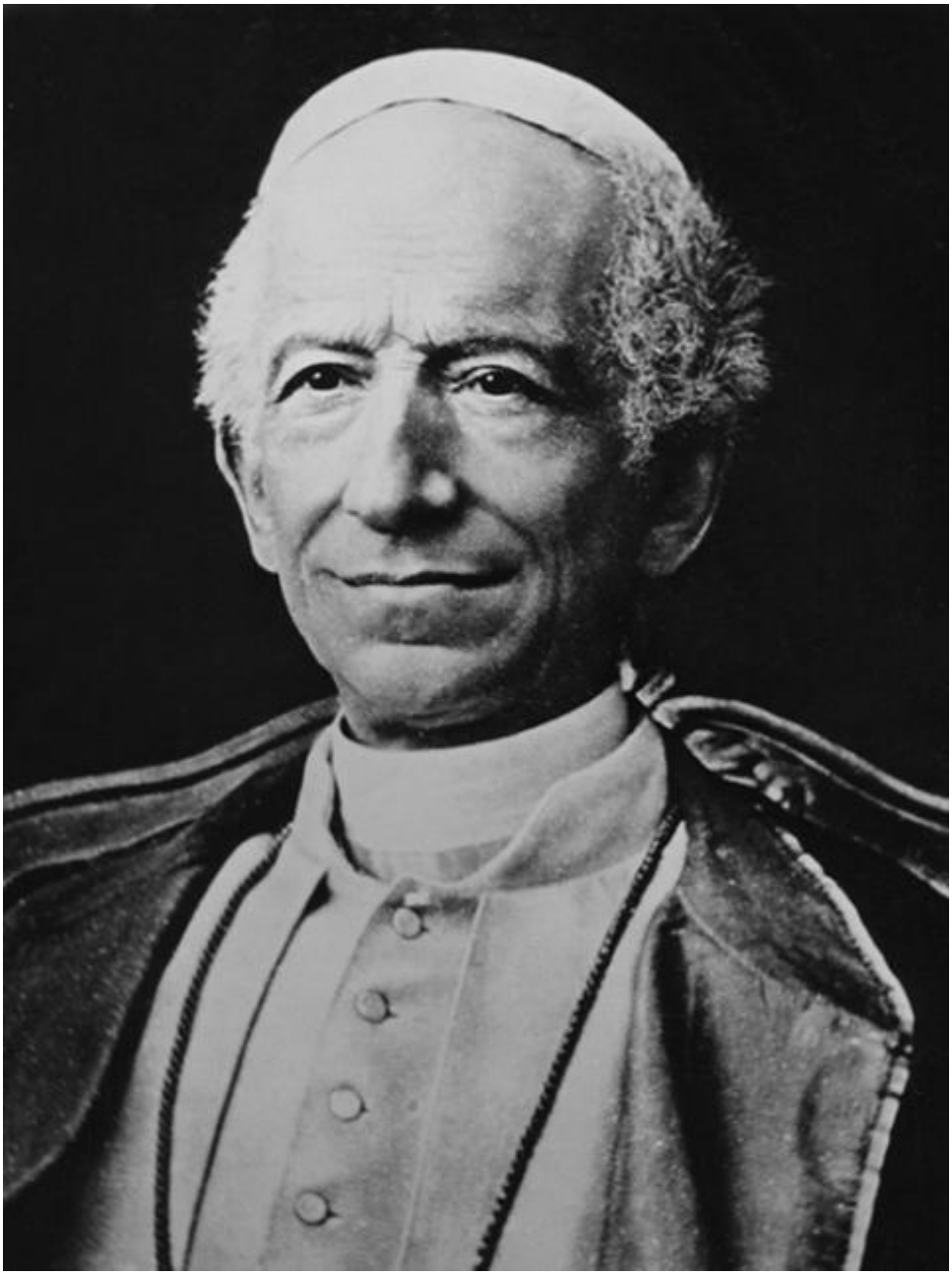
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May 8, 2025

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Although the choice of the name "Leo" may have taken the world by surprise as the American-born Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost chose his papal name on May 8, church historians familiar with the cardinal's career and the needs of the church were probably not surprised.

The newly elected Pope Leo XIV, 69, a native of Chicago, spent many years as a missionary priest — and later as a bishop in Peru. He taught in the seminary of Trujillo in northwestern Peru for 10 years. In those years and later, he undoubtedly saw the continuing need for a church that would reach out through social justice and charity to the world — as did his predecessor Pope Francis.



Pope Leo XIII was born in Italy March 2, 1810. In his 1891 social encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII advocated for just working conditions, the rights of workers to bargain collectively and form unions, and to earn a living wage. (CNS/Library of Congress)

Cardinal Prevost certainly knew that the 19th-century Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903) would be an outstanding model for that kind of needed global outreach. In *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII's remarkably progressive encyclical, church thinking about the rights of workers was presented in a totally new and modern way.

In 1891, Leo championed revolutionary concepts — fair wages, safe working conditions and the legitimacy of trade unions. But his long papacy was also marked by a diplomatic outreach to nations around the world. He wanted the church to be truly engaged with the world and truly ministering to it in every way possible.

The new Leo may have also had in mind the first pope by that name — St. Leo the Great (circa 400-461). This Leo served as pope from 440-461 and has also been remembered for his strong leadership, his outreach to the world and for his exceptional peacemaking efforts. Pope Leo I was also a prolific writer and theologian whose sermons are still quoted and studied today — more than 1,500 years later.

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Most historically memorable for the world was Leo the Great's role as the diplomat who met with Attila the Hun near Rome in 452. Attila was preparing to enter and destroy Rome. Leo, relying on prayer and his God-given negotiating skills, convinced Attila to abandon his plans to attack. Attila did leave, and Rome survived though the Huns had already previously swept through and devastated large parts of the Eastern Roman Empire and the Balkans.

Outside of church history, the name Leo in both Greek and in Latin means "lion," and is said to symbolize courage and strength. A worthy and meaningful name for thousands of years.

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