News



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. (OSV News/Reuters/Claudia Greco)

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Vatican City — May 8, 2025

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The Catholic Church has a new leader, with the Augustinian Cardinal Robert Prevost elected as Pope Leo XIV, his chosen name as bishop of Rome. He is the first North American pope and, according to a prominent genealogist, a pope with African-Creole ancestry.

The understated candidate triumphed on the second day of voting in a count kept under permanent Vatican seal. The results were announced with white smoke in St. Peter's Square Thursday evening, May 8, with the new pope making his first appearance to a crowd of more than 100,000 from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica.

"Thank you to my cardinal brothers who chose me to be the successor of Peter and to walk together with you as a united church searching all together for peace and justice," the 69-year-old Chicago native said in a bilingual (Italian and Spanish) address that included odes of thanks to his predecessor, Pope Francis.

"We have to look together how to be a missionary church, building bridges, dialogue, always open to receiving with open arms for everyone, like this square, open to all, to all who need our charity, our presence, dialogue, love."

Leo XIV is a member of a religious order named for the famous African St. Augustine of Hippo.

Louisiana Creole expert Jari Honora has traced Prevost's ancestry to the Black community of New Orleans. His maternal ancestors lived in the Crescent City before migrating to Chicago in the early 20th century, Honora said.

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Leo XIV is not known to have publicly commented having African ancestry, which is part of a mixed heritage that also includes French, Italian and Spanish roots. According to the U.S. Census, Prevost's mother, the late Mildred Martinez, was the mixed-race daughter of Black property owners, the Haitian-born Joseph Martinez and New Orleans native Louise Baquié, a Creole.

As such, Leo XIV could be considered the first Black pope in the history of the Catholic Church, though it is unclear how he identifies racially.

"It's more complicated than that," Honora told Black Catholic Messenger. "I think that a person can be of Black ancestry or have Black roots, but to identify as Black, I think, is all about the lived experience."

According to Holy See press director Matteo Bruni, the name Leo XIV was chosen in reference to the pioneering Pope Leo XIII, who reigned in the late 19th century. He steered the church toward its teachings on justice and labor with his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, an enduring text that continues to form a baseline for Catholic social teaching.

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Born in 1955, Prevost was raised on the South Side of Chicago and ordained for the Augustinians in 1982. He then earned a doctorate in canon law at the Angelicum in Rome before embarking on a decade-plus stint in Peru, where he embedded himself in the community and became a beloved local figure. While there, he led an Augustinian seminary and served in the local diocesan chancery.

Prevost was elected provincial of the Chicago Augustinians in 1998 and served in the United States briefly before being elected head of the order globally, returning to Rome for 12 years beginning in 2001.

In 2015, Francis named him bishop of Chiclayo in Peru, after a year as apostolic administrator. He later served as a member of two Vatican departments, now known as the Dicastery for the Clergy and the Dicastery for Bishops. He was named the head of the latter in 2023, the same year Francis made him a cardinal.

Prior to the 2025 conclave, the largest and perhaps most diverse in history, Prevost was seen as papabile, though not a supremely strong candidate. Media observers had predicted that the church could return to the Italian tradition for a new pope, or to new voices elsewhere in Western Europe, Asia or Africa. An American pope was seen as only an outside possibility.

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Perceived as a modern voice disconnected from at least some American cultural baggage — having lived in the country only briefly during the last quarter-century —

Leo XIV is likely to continue the legacy of Francis as it is popularly perceived.

If it serves as any indication, Leo's personal Twitter account (which as of Thursday remains active) displays recent criticisms of the administration of President Donald Trump, advocacy against clerical sex abuse, endorsements of synodality, and the celebration of modern liturgies in a global context.

One common thread among them is, unsurprisingly, Francis himself, who featured in Leo's aforementioned opening address.

"Let us keep in our ears the weak but always brave voice of Pope Francis, who blessed Rome — the pope who blessed Rome and the world that day on the morning of Easter," he said, referring to the late Holy Father's final hours, which included a surprise appearance in St. Peter's Square in April.

"Allow me to continue that same blessing. God loves us, all of us, evil will not prevail. We are all in the hands of God. Without fear, united, hand in hand with God and among ourselves, we will go forward."

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