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Cardinal Wilton Gregory, retired archbishop of Washington, speaks at a news conference May 9, 2025, at the Pontifical North American College in Rome while his successor, Cardinal Robert McElroy, listens. (CNS/Kendall McLaren)



by Rhina Guidos

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Rome — May 9, 2025

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U.S. Cardinal Joseph Tobin recalled a moment when he saw his friend Bob put his head in his hands after it had become clear that he was about to become the next pope.

"I was praying because I couldn't imagine what happens to a human being when you're faced with something like that," Tobin, the archbishop of Newark, New Jersey, said May 9. "And then, when he accepted it, it was like he was made for it."

U.S. cardinals who took part in the [conclave election process](#) that gave the Catholic Church Pope Leo XIV said prelates went looking for someone among them who could strengthen the Christian faith. They weren't looking for a replacement for Pope Francis, nor a counterweight to U.S. President Donald Trump, as some have suggested, they said.

The cardinal electors spoke of their conclave experiences and insight with a group of journalists May 9 at the Pontifical North American College in Rome, where seminarians from the United States train to become priests. They sat on a stage in an auditorium where the media from around the world attending included network anchor Lester Holt of NBC News and correspondent Terry Moran of ABC.



Cardinals Blase Cupich of Chicago and Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, laugh during a news conference at the Pontifical North American College in Rome May 9, 2025. (CNS/Kendall McLaren)

Though Leo XIV is billed as the first U.S. pope, he was not part of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops when he was [Cardinal Robert Prevost](#). He has spent most of his episcopal life and service as an Augustinian priest in Peru.

And though he was born in the U.S., the new pope "is really a citizen of the entire world," [Cardinal Daniel DiNardo](#), of the Galveston-Houston Diocese.

Different groups see what they want in the new pope, said a [Peruvian sister from his Augustinian order](#) who has known him for a long time.

"For the North Americans, he's a North American, and for the Peruvians, he's Peruvian," Augustinian Sr. Marlene Quispe told National Catholic Reporter May 9, hours after her friend *Monseñor Robert* became the pope.

French [Cardinal Christophe Pierre](#), apostolic nuncio, or ambassador, to the United States, joined the group of cardinal electors, acknowledging the universality of the new pope, who has spent most of his life in South America, where the last pope came from.

Retired Cardinal Wilton Gregory, [former archbishop of Washington](#), said he told the new pope, "I promise you my respect, my fidelity, and my love."

He said for cardinals who came from such different parts of the world, who have different perspectives and realities, and face a lot of different challenges, it was a feat but also an act of unity to elect someone for such an enormous role in less than 24 hours.

"I think we did well," Gregory said.

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Cardinal Robert McElroy, the [newly installed archbishop of Washington](#) who sat next to him, said the cardinals witnessed something momentous.

"I always thought it would be impossible to have an American pope in my lifetime," McElroy said. After entering the Sistine Chapel, two by two, the weight of the moment, with the angels and the saints accompanying them, the litany of the saints, an environment of prayer, everything dissipated. "We were looking at that moment into the souls of one another."

There was something about the discernment, the prayer, the searching process, being in the city that saw the Christian martyrs and others who gave their lives, and now something similar has happened to Prevost in giving his life, too, McElroy said.

It wasn't something that Prevost said that got him elected. He didn't give a speech, the way some say the late Pope Francis had in 2013, that helped get him elected. McElroy said it was not in the substance, "but the manner in which he said it."



Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York and Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, the retired archbishop of Galveston-Houston, talk during a news conference at the Pontifical North American College May 9, 2025. (CNS/Kendall McLaren)

The cardinal electors faced some questions, including several related to Trump. They were greeted with uncomfortable pauses. New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who is seen as [friendly with Trump](#), said, "I wouldn't see him as a counterweight" to Trump, "or anything like that."

Chicago's [Cardinal Blase Cupich](#) said they also didn't go looking for another Pope Francis.

"We don't talk about a replacement but a successor," he said.

They said the world should let the new pope come into his own. Prevost the cardinal will be different as Pope Leo XIV, just as Simon the Apostle changed when he became Peter.

"We are surprisingly eager to find out about Leo the man," said Dolan.

They said he comes with gifts and tools that will serve him well.

"He's navigated the corridors of the Vatican and that will serve him well," said Tobin, who knew him as cardinal. "He really is a listener and then he acts."

Leo knows about the Vatican government bureaucracy and is a man of prayer and discernment, they said. Now it's time to let him reveal his personality as pope, DiNardo said.

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

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