News



Fr. Ajani Gibson, pastor of St. Peter Claver in the Seventh Ward neighborhood where the maternal grandparents of Pope Leo XIV lived, sits inside the church in New Orleans, May 9. (AP/Gerald Herbert)

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The new pope's French-sounding last name, Prevost, intrigued Jari Honora, a New Orleans genealogist, who began digging in the archives and discovered the pope had deep roots in the Big Easy.

All four of Pope Leo XIV's maternal great-grandparents were "free people of color" in Louisiana based on 19th-century census records, Honora found. As part of the melting pot of French, Spanish, African and Native American cultures in Louisiana, the pope's maternal ancestors would be considered Creole.

"It was special for me because I share that heritage and so do many of my friends who are Catholic here in New Orleans," said Honora, a historian at the Historic New Orleans Collection, a museum in the French Quarter.

Honora and others in the Black and Creole Catholic communities say the election of Leo — a Chicago native who spent over two decades in Peru including eight years as a bishop — is just what the Catholic Church needs to unify the global church and elevate the profile of Black Catholics whose history and contributions have long been overlooked.

A rich cultural identity

Leo, who has not spoken publicly about his roots, may also have an ancestral connection to Haiti. His grandfather, Joseph Norval Martinez, may have been born there, though historical records are conflicting, Honora said. However, Martinez's parents — the pope's great-grandparents — were living in Louisiana since at least the 1850s, he said.

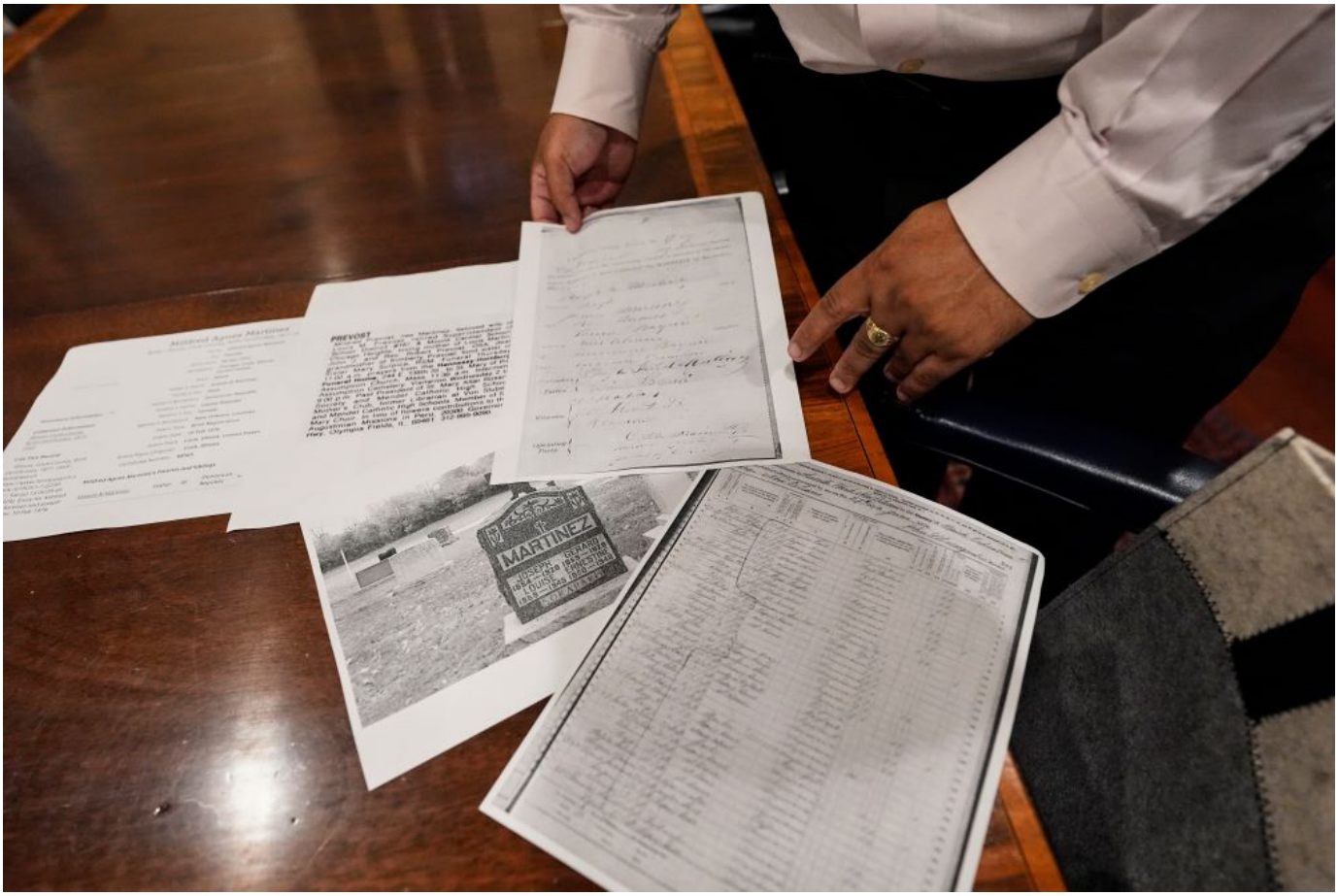
> 'Just as Black history is American history, (Leo's) story also reminds us that Black history is, and always has been, Catholic history, including in the United States.'

—Shannen Dee Williams

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Andrew Jolivette, a professor of sociology and Afro-Indigenous Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, did his own digging and found the pope's ancestry reflected the unique cultural tapestry of southern Louisiana. The pope's Creole roots draw attention to the complex, nuanced identities Creoles hold, he said.

"There is Cuban ancestry on his maternal side. So, there are a number of firsts here and it's a matter of pride for Creoles," said Jolivette, whose family is Creole from Louisiana. "So, I also view him as a Latino pope because the influence of Latino heritage cannot be ignored in the conversation about Creoles."



Jari Honora, family historian for the Historic New Orleans Collection, shows genealogy material related to the grandparents of Pope Leo XIV in New Orleans May 9. (AP/Gerald Herbert)

Most Creoles are Catholic and historically it was their faith that kept families together as they migrated to larger cities like Chicago, Jolivette said.

The former Cardinal Robert Prevost's maternal grandparents — identified as "mulatto" and "Black" in historical records — married in New Orleans in 1887 and lived in the city's historically Creole Seventh Ward. In the coming years, the Jim Crow regime of racial segregation rolled back post-Civil War reforms and "just about every aspect of their lives was circumscribed by race, extending even to the church," Honora said.

An American story of migration

The pope's grandparents migrated to Chicago around 1910, like many other African American families leaving the racial oppression of the Deep South, and "passed for white," Honora said. The pope's mother, Mildred Agnes Martinez, who was born in Chicago, is identified as "white" on her 1912 birth certificate, Honora said.

"You can understand, people may have intentionally sought to obfuscate their heritage," he said. "Always life has been precarious for people of color in the South, New Orleans included."

The pope's grandparents' old home in New Orleans was later destroyed, along with hundreds of others, to build a highway overpass that "eviscerated" a stretch of the largely Black neighborhood in the 1960s, Honora said.



Marc Morial, former New Orleans mayor and current president of the National Urban League, speaks to the Associated Press about the creole roots of Pope Leo XIV, in New Orleans on May 9. (AP/Gerald Herbert)

A former New Orleans mayor, Marc Morial, called the pope's family's history, "an American story of how people escape American racism and American bigotry."

Morial, a Catholic with Creole heritage who grew up near the neighborhood where the pope's grandparents lived, said he has contradictory feelings. While he's proud of the pope's connection to his city, Morial said the new pontiff's maternal family's shifting racial identity highlights "the idea that in America people had to escape their authenticity to be able to survive."

African American influence on Catholicism

Fr. Ajani Gibson, who heads the predominantly Black congregation at St. Peter Claver Church in New Orleans, said he sees the pope's roots as a reaffirmation of African American influence on Catholicism in his city.

"I think a lot of people take for granted that the things that people love most about New Orleans are both Black and Catholic," said Gibson, referring to rich cultural contributions to Mardi Gras, New Orleans' jazz tradition and brass band parades known as second-lines.

He hoped the pope's Creole heritage — emerging from the city's "cultural gumbo pot" — signals an inclusive outlook for the Catholic Church.

"I want the continued elevation of the universal nature of the church — that the church looks, feels, sounds like everybody," Gibson said. "We all have a place and we come and bring who we are, completely and totally, as gifts to the church."



This expressway overpass stands at the site of the former home of Pope Leo XIV's grandparents in the Seventh Ward of New Orleans May 9. (AP/Gerald Herbert)

Shannen Dee Williams, a history professor at the University of Dayton, said she hopes that Leo's "genealogical roots and historic papacy will underscore that all roads in American Catholicism, in North, South and Central America, lead back to the

church's foundational roots in its mostly unacknowledged and unreconciled histories of Catholic colonialism, slavery and segregation."

"There have always been two trans-Atlantic stories of American Catholicism; one that begins with Europeans and another one that begins with Africans and African-descended people, free and enslaved, living in Europe and Africa in the 16th century," Williams said. "Just as Black history is American history, (Leo's) story also reminds us that Black history is, and always has been, Catholic history, including in the United States."

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Hope for the future

Kim R. Harris, associate professor of African American Religious Thought and Practice at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, said the pope's genealogy got her thinking about the seven African American Catholics on the path to sainthood who have been recognized by the National Black Catholic Congress, but haven't yet been canonized.

Harris highlighted Pierre Toussaint, a philanthropist born in Haiti as a slave who became a New York City entrepreneur and was declared "Venerable" by Pope John Paul II in 1997.

"The excitement I have in this moment probably has to do with the hope that this pope's election will help move this canonization process along," Harris said.

Related: Stand up for the African Americans on the path to sainthood

While it's not known how Leo identifies himself racially, his roots bring a sense of hope to African American Catholics, Harris said.

"When I think about a person who brings so much of the history of this country in his bones, I really hope it brings to light who we are as Americans, and who we are as people of the diaspora," she said. "It brings a whole new perspective and widens the vision of who we all are."

Reynold Verret, president of Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, the only historically Black Catholic university, said he was "a little surprised" about the pope's

heritage.

"It's a joyful connection," he said. "It is an affirmation that the Catholic Church is truly universal and that (Black) Catholics remained faithful regardless of a church that was human and imperfect. It also shows us that the church transcends national borders."

This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** and **Looking for Leo in History** feature series.