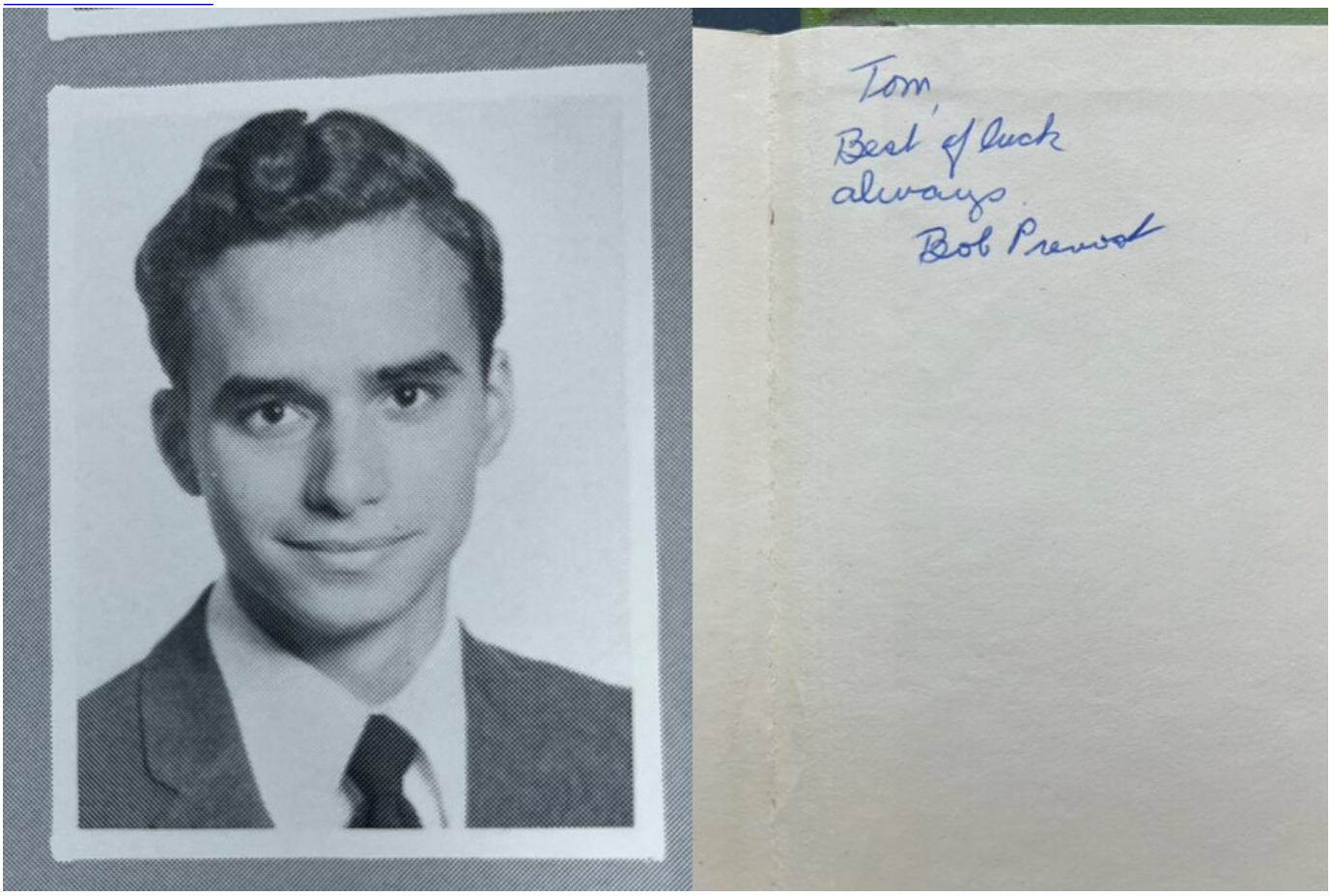
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A photo of a young Robert Prevost, the future Pope Leo XIV, taken from his high school yearbook is seen next to his signature. He spent most of his childhood in the greater Chicago area, but he attended high school at the now-closed St. Augustine Seminary High School in Holland, Mich. The former Cardinal Prevost, an Augustinian, was elected to the papacy May 8, 2025, becoming the first American pope in history. (OSV News/courtesy Fr. Becket Franks)

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The new Roman pontiff — the vicar of Christ on earth — attended high school in western Michigan.

For Catholics from the Great Lakes state, that sentence might take a while to sink in.

Born in Chicago in 1955, Pope Leo XIV spent most of his childhood in the greater Chicago area, but he attended high school at the now-closed St. Augustine Seminary High School in Holland, to be exact.

The Chicago Sun Times, in a report May 3, said he attended the small Augustinian prep school in the early 1970s as he was discerning the priesthood with the Order of St. Augustine. He was a member of the class of 1973.

The school's class sizes were small at the time, so if you were a student there, it was likely you knew the future pope, born Robert Francis Prevost. To his friends, he was simply known as "Bob."

One of those friends was Fr. Becket Franks, a Benedictine monk who currently lives and serves at St. Procopius Abbey in Lisle, Illinois.

"I was there from 1968 to 1972, so he was a year behind me," Franks said. "The school was so small, there couldn't have been more than 65 people. Everyone knew everyone."

Today, the former school is known as the Felt Estate, a 12,000-foot historic mansion in Laketown Township that, from 1949 to 1977, served as a Catholic prep school run

by the Augustinians. At its peak in the 1960s, the seminary high school enrolled 180 students, most of whom came from Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana and Michigan.

Those who attended the school say it was the type of close-knit place where lifelong memories were formed.

"We all knew each other. Even though we had different courses for different grades, all of our curriculums were smashed together," Franks told Detroit Catholic, the news outlet of the Archdiocese of Detroit, in a phone interview. "I was in choir with Bob. I was in reader's theater with him. We interacted all the time together."

Franks remembers the new Roman pontiff as a highly intelligent, well-liked student, and the sort of classmate who would go out of his way to help everyone else, especially those in need.

"The most outstanding thing is how smart he is," Franks said. "He was into everything, he knew everything, and it came easily. And he brought all of us along with him."

By the end of his sophomore year, the future Pope Leo XIV was already speaking fluent French, and would frequently help classmates with their schoolwork.

"He was known as the tutor of the school; if you had problems with your English paper, go see Prevost. If you have problems with your math homework, go see Prevost. If you didn't understand some history project, go see Bob," Franks said. "And Bob would help us."

A newspaper clipping from the Holland Sentinel from Oct. 7, 1972, shared that Bob was honored "for his high performance on the 1971 Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test."

The future pope also was "consistently on the Honor Roll," was in the National Honor Society and part of the school's Mission Club. He was vice president of the Student Council, president of the Library Club, senior class president and a senator at the Student Congress in Lansing.

He was also editor-in-chief of the school's yearbook — which he signed for Franks, simply, "Best of luck always, Bob Prevost."

Franks remembers the new pope for his down-to-earth personality, quiet wit and characteristic Midwest charm, but also as someone who could appreciate a good joke and a little levity, he said.

"He was quiet and serious, but with wry humor," Franks said. "He does have a good sense of humor, but it's understated and quiet — when he starts that smirk on his face, you know he's going to laugh."

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Like the rest of the country, Franks wasn't prepared for the shock of seeing an American — let alone his high school friend — step out onto the loggia above St. Peter's Square on May 8. As the curtains drew back and the words "Dominum Robertum Franciscum Prevost" were spoken by the cardinal proto-deacon, he nearly fell out of his chair.

Franks' initial reaction "wasn't really Benedictine monkish," he laughed.

"I started screaming. I was in the kitchen, and the monks came running in, thinking something was wrong," Franks said. "And I said, 'My high school classmate just got named pope!'"

Although cellphones aren't usually allowed in the abbey's dining room, the prior made an exception, and the monks huddled around Franks' tiny phone screen to watch as Prevost was introduced to the world as Pope Leo XIV.

"Everybody let me play my phone live of Bob coming out on the loggia, and I just started crying," Franks said. "And everyone's going, 'That's so cool. You know him.' I went to school with him. It was a very special, wild day."

Franks said he has kept in touch with the new pope "on again, off again" over the years — a Christmas card here, a letter there. Occasionally they'd see each other during events, sharing a quick greeting.

Since the announcement, he's spoken with other classmates who are equally as shocked and proud.

"One is an ER doctor down in Georgia, and I called him, and he said one of his nurses told him," Franks said. "He said, 'Can you believe it? Bob is the pope.'"

Like many, Franks is confident Pope Leo XIV will be a blessing for the church, just as Bob Prevost was a blessing to his high school classmates.

In 2024, then-Cardinal Prevost spoke about his time in high school during an event at St. Jude Church in New Lenox, Illinois.

According to one report, the future pope told members of the parish how he was impacted by those at St. Augustine, including one educator who "was a really dedicated teacher and Augustinian," he said.

He entered the novitiate for the Midwest Augustinians in 1977. He professed first vows in 1978 and final vows in 1981. He was ordained a priest the following year. Then-Father Prevost spent decades as a missionary in Peru, but later returned to the U.S. as provincial of his order's Chicago-based Midwest province and then his order's worldwide leader, a role he held for two, six-year terms.

He was bishop of Chiclayo, Peru, from September 2015 until January 2023 when he was named the prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops. He was elevated to cardinal in September 2023.

Franks said the man who signed a high school yearbook "Bob Prevost" continued to humbly sign letters the same way throughout the years.

His signature will hold a bit more weight these days — even if the name is different.

"Pay close attention to why he chose Leo XIV," Franks said. "If you know anything about Pope Leo XIII, this is a man who is going to further the social teachings of the church. He's someone who's going to stand up for unions and workers and migrants and immigrants. That's going to be Pope Leo."

As the world gets to know the 266th successor to St. Peter, Franks and others hope they see the same caring, thoughtful, smart and faith-filled follower of Christ they knew as a teenager growing up along the shores of Lake Michigan.

"He's just a humble, forthright, down-to-earth guy," Franks added. "He was always respectable and in position, but at the same time, always himself."

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