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People react at the Cathedral of St. Mary in Chiclayo, Peru, May 8, 2025, the day Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost was elected pope. He chose the papal name Leo XIV. As an Augustinian priest, then-Father Prevost spent many years as a missionary in Peru. (OSV News/Reuters/Sebastian Castaneda)

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In a country where over 90% of the population identifies as Christian — and nearly three-quarters as Catholic — the election of a new pope is more than a Vatican affair. It's personal.

On May 8, when white smoke rose over St. Peter's Square, signaling the election of Leo XIV, Peru seemed to hold its breath. Schools went silent. Restaurants turned up their televisions. Taxi drivers, hairdressers and shopkeepers paused mid-conversation.

And then, as the name of Chicago-born Robert Francis Prevost, a former bishop of a dusty northern diocese of a country called "Poland of South America" because of its Catholicism and a naturalized Peruvian citizen, rang out, the country erupted.

"We screamed," said Aldo Llanos, a professor of philosophy and anthropology in the University of Piura. "It was like a World Cup goal."

During his first address as pontiff, Leo — formerly Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost — paused to greet "my dear Diocese of Chiclayo, Peru, where a faithful people have accompanied their bishop, shared their faith and has given so much, so much to continue to be a faithful Church of Jesus Christ."

That "faithful people" includes Llanos, who recalled meeting then-Bishop Prevost in the course of his work with Opus Dei.

"In Chiclayo, Opus Dei runs programs for family and youth formation. Bishop Prevost knew us, trusted us. When he left, during an informal meeting we had with him, he told us that he had never met people who worked so hard — and who were so obedient to their bishop."

Between 2015 and 2023, Prevost shepherded the Diocese of Chiclayo through some of its most difficult times. Most notably, he was at the forefront of the church's response to the catastrophic 2017 El Niño Costero, which brought record flooding,

destroyed homes and cut off entire communities from vital resources.

"Bishop Prevost was never the kind of bishop who gave orders from behind a desk," said Janinna Sesa Córdova, who led Caritas Chiclayo from 2014 to 2024. "He was the face of Christ, the one who went out into the mud to help his people."

When the La Leche River overflowed, cutting off roads and displacing entire neighborhoods, the future pope mobilized the church. "He always made sure the church stood on its feet," Sesa said. "He coordinated with local businesses for donations, and with the help of civilian volunteers and the armed forces, we were able to airlift aid into isolated areas."

His legacy in Lambayeque, the region encompassing Chiclayo, was further sealed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid the oxygen shortages that cost countless lives across Peru, Prevost spearheaded one of the region's most important charitable initiatives: the Oxygen of Hope campaign.

"There was no oxygen. Families were dying," Sesa recalled. "Thanks to Msgr. Prevost, we were able to purchase two medicinal oxygen plants and provide free care to hundreds of families. His human sensitivity, especially in moments of crisis, won him the heart of every Chiclayano."

He was a hands-on bishop, ready to "come out in boots and a poncho," Llanos said,while "when it was time for Mass, he was impeccably vested — a symbol of his ecclesial balance and reverence."

The fact that as the country was locking down, he walked across the city carrying the Blessed Sacrament, much like Pope Francis had done in St. Peter's Square during that historic blessing to the world in March 2020, made it clear that all his charitable endeavors were rooted in Christ, she said.

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Unlike more confrontational church figures, Leo XIV built a reputation as a calm, balanced and deeply pastoral leader. "He is not one for public clashes or flashy gestures," said Llanos. "If he had a hard truth to share, or a correction to make, he did it in private."

According to the anthropologist — in a region infested by corruption, illegal mining and organized crime — "we know" of several harsh letters in which he chastised the locals.

His ability to navigate conflicting political and ecclesial positions with diplomacy led to him being appointed second vice president of Peru's bishops' conference in 2018 and later his appointment to Rome as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops.

"I don't know if he will maintain the same style, but opposite to some more confrontational bishops, always ready to give a statement to a camera or publicly denounce something, he would make his criticism known through social media, as he did with (Vice President) JD Vance on migration, or with (President Donald) Trump tariffs," Llanos said. "But beyond that, he has a very delicate way with people, and if he has to correct someone, he will do so in private.

Though his social convictions were clear — rejecting gender ideology and the redefinition of marriage — he avoided extremes.

"He'll always find a way to make his point," said Llanos, "but without condemning anyone on camera. That's what makes him so effective."

"Had he stayed in his native country, I think his sense of the church would've been very different," Llanos reflected. "But he came to Peru in 1985 — a country in crisis — and was changed by it. That experience left a mark."

Now, as pope, Leo XIV embodies the Peruvian church: fervently Catholic, socially engaged and close to the people. And when he returns to Peru, Llanos said, it will be "apotheotic" — overwhelming, jubilant, unforgettable.

"He has left an indelible mark on the hearts of Chiclayo," Sesa, who worked in Caritas, added. "Because he was always there — in the floods, the pandemic, the celebrations, and the sorrows. A bishop of the people. A true shepherd."

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