News
EarthBeat



Pope Leo XIV, then Apostolic Administrator of Chiclayo Robert Prevost, preaches during a Corpus Christi celebration in a stadium in Chiclayo, Peru, Friday, June 19, 2015. (AP/Julio Reano)

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São Paulo — May 13, 2025
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The bishop sat quietly near the front row, hands folded, listening as Indigenous leaders and church workers spoke about the threats to Peru's northern forests, a part of the Amazon rain forest. It was 2016, a year after Laudato Si', Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment.

When he was up to speak, the bishop didn't preach though he was in his city of Chiclayo as host of a regional gathering. Instead, he reflected on things he had seen.

"It's a very important encyclical," he said. "It also represents something new in terms of this explicit expression of the church's concern for all of creation."

That bishop, Robert Prevost, is now Pope Leo XIV.

"He was always very welcoming, very close to the people," Laura Vargas, secretary of the Interreligious Council of Peru, who helped organize the event, recalled in a phone interview with The Associated Press.

"He had no problem saying yes when we proposed it — he was genuinely interested in social pastoral work."

Since then, Prevost deepened his ties with interfaith environmental networks like the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative and Indigenous organizations such as AIDESEP, which place forest protection and rights at the center of Church concern.

Such credentials have brought hope to clergymen and faithful in the Amazon region, a vast area with 48 million residents and 6.7 million square kilometers (2.6 million square miles) in South America. They see Chicago-born Prevost, who spent about two decades in Peru's countryside, as a pontiff who will protect the region and fight

against climate change.

NAVIGATING THE AMAZON

Many Catholics have said they believe Prevost's experience as bishop of Chiclayo, a city of 630,000 residents in Northern Peru and not too far from the Amazon, was one of the key reasons he was chosen. They also said the pontiff's hands-on experience in an impoverished area far from major cities could also serve him well in dealing with the Amazon and navigating its challenges.

The Amazon is a key regulator of the climate, as its dense forests absorb carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas that when released into the atmosphere heats the planet. But many parts of the Amazon are under threat from a wide range of illegal activities: farmers clearing trees to raise cows, gold miners dredging rivers and destroying local ecosystems and land-grabbers seizing territories. Wildfires and droughts, exacerbated by climate change, have also hit Amazon communities hard in recent years.

Prevost is well acquainted with these issues, having presided over the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, which helped him bond with colleagues of the nine countries touched by the Amazon. Many of them are among the 105 bishops of an organization he openly supports, the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network, a Catholic Church network focused on the Amazon region.

"I spoke to him a number of times about the Amazon and the environment. He doesn't need to be convinced of its importance," said Cardinal Pedro Barreto, the president of the network, who has known Prevost since he became the bishop of Chiclayo in 2015.

Brazilian Friar Paulo Xavier agrees.

"Leo will follow Francis; we are going forward with environment protection," Xavier said. "The Holy Spirit has acted on our behalf."

Xavier is based in Manaus, a city of 2 million residents in the Amazon which received its first-ever cardinal appointed by Francis in 2022: the now 74-year-old archbishop Leonardo Steiner, an enthusiast of Laudato Si'.

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Steiner, Xavier and the Manaus archdiocese have invested to get the encyclical into the hands of locals, even when that means jumping on small, motorized canoes through the brown waters of the Negro River to reach isolated villages in journeys that can last days on a boat.

POPE FOR ACTION

In November 2024, the Vatican News reported that Prevost called for more action to tackle climate change and protect the environment during a seminar in Rome. He cited efforts the Vatican has taken such as installing solar panels and electric vehicles.

On the social media platform X, Prevost has reposted messages about protecting the environment. One message he reposted on April 1, 2017, expressed concern about emissions of carbon dioxide, a planet-warming gas, during President Donald Trump's first term.

Laura Vicuña, an Indigenous woman of the Kariri people and the vice president of the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon Region, said in a letter published on social media that she hopes the pope will be an ally in the fight against climate change. The conference was created by Francis in 2020 to promote discussion between clergymen and laypeople.

"From our dear Amazon, we plead with you to be our ally in the defense of what is the most sacred for us; life, land and rights," Vicuña wrote.

Indigenous peoples like Vicuña's Kariri are often regarded as key protectors of the Amazon, but for many years they have been forced out of their lands by criminals, deforestation and famine, as seen in the Yanomami lands in Northern Brazil in 2023.

Spaniard Luis Ventura, the executive-secretary of Brazil's Indigenous Missionary Council, said he prays for the new pope to keep his eyes close to the Amazon, with a special attention to the Indigenous. Founded in 1972, the council had rare occasions to meet with pontiffs until Francis rose in 2013. Its members hope Leo doesn't change that.

"Leo XIV will have a big impact on the Amazon," said Ventura. "His life was always with the people in Peru, and that allows us to think the church will be deep into the

territory."

CLIMATE URGENCY

Francis showed great interest in the Amazon during his pontificate. Four years after Laudato Si', he hosted the Amazon Synod, which sought "new Paths for the Church and for an integral ecology."

Rose Bertoldo, one of the secretaries of the Manaus archdiocese, said she is hopeful for the region's future under Leo, given it would build on Francis' interest. She added the new pontiff will have a chance to visit Brazil, the nation with the most Catholics in the world, during this year's U.N. climate summit, known as COP30, in the Amazonian city of Belem in November.

"We know that the urgencies and the challenges in the Amazon will be bigger because of the global political context of division. We need him at COP," Bertoldo said.

Irish priest Peter Hughes, who spent most of his life in Peru, met Prevost shortly after he arrived in the Andean nation in 1985. They quickly became friends, and would see each other when the bishop of Chiclayo was in the capital Lima.

"Back then, (Prevost) was worried about extractivism in the Amazon and the effect it had on the poor," said Hughes, referring to the new pontiff. "Now it is a much more complex world, the urgency is evident."

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