Opinion
Guest Voices



Someone holds a placard with an image of Pope Leo XIV on the day of a Mass at the Cathedral of Santa Maria de Chiclayo in Peru May 10, 2025, celebrating the election of Pope Leo XIV May 8 at the Vatican. The new pope was bishop of Chiclayo between 2015 and 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Sebastian Castaneda)



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May 14, 2025
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The Holy Spirit surprised us on May 8 by electing Robert Prevost, an Illinois native who is also a citizen of Peru. For Vatican observers, Pope Leo XIV is the biggest shock since the last conclave, when an Argentine Jesuit who was on (almost) nobody's list became Pope Francis.

How did this happen?

Prior to the 2013 conclave, there were, in my mind, two certitudes about papal elections: No Jesuit would be elected, and no American would be elected. The election of Francis proved me wrong about the first, and this one proved me wrong about the second.

Historically, the cardinals tried to keep the papacy out of the hands of the reigning superpower. The one time France got it, they carried it off to Avignon in 1309, and it took almost 70 years to get it back to Rome. In today's world, I always feared that if an American were elected, the Global South would think the CIA fixed the election or Wall Street bought the election. But the cardinals who gave us Leo thought otherwise.

My best guess is that the Latin American cardinals lined up solidly behind Prevost. They saw him as one of their own, since he had spent 20-some years of his ministry in Latin America, including as bishop of Chiclayo, Peru, from 2015 to 2023. They did not see him as a gringo, but as someone whose heart was in Latin America. He even

became a Peruvian citizen because he thought he was going to spend the rest of his life in Peru.

With the Latin Americans behind him, I expect that he did better than expected on the first ballot, which made the other cardinals take a closer look at him. He exceeded expectations, while some of the other candidates who were touted in the Italian media did poorer than expected.

What the cardinals saw, they liked. Here was a man trusted by Francis in 2023 with one of the most important jobs in the Vatican — head of the Dicastery for Bishops, which nominates candidates for the episcopacy all over the world. He fit the ideal profile, having worked both as a diocesan bishop and in the Vatican.

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Because of this job, his fellow cardinals knew him. They had met with him and found him someone who was a good listener. Others had gotten to know him as he traveled to 47 countries as the superior of his religious community, the Augustinians, from 2001 to 2013. He speaks multiple languages: English, Spanish, Italian, French and Portuguese. If he had been an Italian, he would have been at the top of everyone's list of papabili.

Prevost must have picked up votes in the second and third ballots on Thursday morning. That momentum took him over the top Thursday evening.

What kind of pope will he be?

We won't really know for six to 12 months, but that won't stop me from speculating.

Popes can surprise us. John XXIII (1958-63) was supposed to be a do-nothing pope, but he called the Second Vatican Council. John Paul II (1978-2005) was supposed to be a progressive but turned out to be conservative on internal church issues. Francis was supposed to be a conservative but ended up being an avid reformer.

We are meant to understand a pope's chosen name as a sign of their intentions. Prevost, by picking Leo, signaled he wants to be a strong proponent of the social justice teaching of the church.

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The last pope of this name, Leo XIII, reigned 1878-1903, as the world had been transformed by the Industrial Revolution. He set the church on the path of defending the working classes and calling for a more just economy. Leo XIII set the foundation upon which other popes and the Second Vatican Council built today's Catholic social teaching.

Leo XIV will continue the legacy of Francis as a prophet speaking out for the poor and the marginalized. His first words to the world were also about peace, which is so needed in our world.

Catholic social teaching is engrained in the DNA of the papacy, and the new Leo is going to carry it forward. Do not be surprised when he speaks for justice, peace and the environment. If this upsets politicians, including U.S. President Donald Trump, so be it. His job is to preach the Gospel, and concern for the poor is at the heart of the Gospel.

In all of this, he is following in the footsteps of Francis, even if they are different people. When Leo stepped out on the balcony of St. Peter's, he was more formally dressed than had been Francis. He was less spontaneous, speaking from a written text. But his endorsement of Francis' priorities of dialogue, bridge-building and peace was unmistakable.

I expect he will also follow the path of Francis on internal church issues, at least initially.

As an American, he has seen the devastating impact of sexual abuse on victims and the church, and he will continue Francis' record of pushing bishops, especially in the Global South, to adopt zero tolerance and to remove abusive priests from ministry. Watch to see if the art of ex-Jesuit Marko Rupnik, a priest accused of multiple abuse, disappears from the Vatican website.



Pope Leo XIV speaks with the College of Cardinals in the New Synod Hall at the Vatican May 10, 2025, during his first formal address to the college since his election May 8. (CNS/Vatican Media)

We should also watch who Leo appoints as his replacement at the Dicastery for Bishops. Francis was slow to realize that personnel is policy and did not get control of the appointment process until he put Prevost in charge.

As head of the Dicastery for Bishops, Leo involved women in the vetting of episcopal candidates. As pope he will continue to promote the role of women in the church, but, as under Francis, women's ordination will probably be a bridge too far.

On LGBTQ+ issues, he will not reverse Francis' pastoral approach but will leave to local bishops how that is implemented.

A signature feature of Francis' papacy was synodality, the involvement of all the church in conversation and discernment of the church's mission. I believe that will continue, but synodality is needed, not just in the Vatican, but in dioceses and

parishes across the world. Commands won't do it; it will take a lot of persuasion. That is a project for decades.

His American and international experience means he will be committed to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. His first major trip will be to Turkey to celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea with the Orthodox and other Christians.

And as a native English speaker, hopefully he can finally get us a decent translation of the liturgy.

Finally, one wonders if the cardinals hope that Leo can bring American management skills to the Vatican bureaucracy and Vatican finances. I have joked in the past that what people want in a pope or bishop is Jesus Christ with an MBA from Harvard. Sadly, that person is not available.

Leo comes from spending two years working in the Vatican Curia, plus 12 years living in Rome as superior to the Augustinian order. He knows Rome, but can he get control of the Vatican bureaucracy? Can he be a compassionate pastor as well as a hard-nosed administrator?

Time will tell.

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