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Augustinian Fr. José Luis Romero Toscano, seen May 12, 2025, serves in the Diocese of Chiclayo, Peru, where Pope Leo XIV was the bishop until 2023. The priest predicted the new pope would draw on Augustinian values to promote unity in the church. (OSV News/David Agren)



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Fr. Jorge Majail still remembers feeling nervous as a young seminarian ahead of a visit from the then-superior general of the Order of St. Augustine, Fr. Robert Francis Prevost — the man who would become Pope Leo XIV.

"You would expect that the general who is going to arrive will be a person who shows his authority. But, no," Majail, now spokesman for the Augustinians in Peru, told OSV News.

"Right from the start, (he was) a simple man. As we say in Peru, 'He doesn't complicate life,'" he explained, using a local phrase which might be translated as: "He doesn't sweat the small stuff."

Leo XIV made history as the first U.S.-born pope and the first Peruvian pope, having become a citizen of the South American country where he arrived as a young Augustinian missionary and served for nearly two decades. He also is the first Augustinian to become pope.

Peruvians have expressed pride and surprise in one of their own becoming pontiff. Augustinians in the country have expressed similar surprise — recalling Leo as an unassuming prelate, who prioritized the poor, sought unity in the Peruvian church and came to embrace the country.

"Here is where he learned to be a missionary priest," Majail said. "A priest, when he develops his ministry … is marked by the places where he begins to be in contact with people, to develop his pastoral work, to work with the community. And Peru was

that place for him."

The Order of St. Augustine arrived in Peru in 1547 — a mission that started with one friar and followed with 12 in 1551. The order ministers throughout the country, operating schools, serving in parishes, and overseeing initiatives for promoting fellowship among youth and families.

The future Pope Leo first visited Peru as a missionary in 1985, serving in a project sponsored by his U.S. province in the community of Chulucanas — "an area punished by poverty," Majail said.

He returned to Peru in the late 1980s, serving in the city of Trujillo and was eventually named bishop of Chiclayo, some 480 miles north of Lima, in 2015.

As a bishop, he was influenced by Augustinian charism, according to colleagues, who pointed to his preference for synodality and promoting unity as examples.

"Pope Francis … proposed synodality and Monsignor Roberto assumed it naturally, since he had already been doing so," Majail said.

"When he was bishop of Chiclayo in the episcopal conference, it was said that Monsignor Roberto always sought the unity of the bishops, consensus, working in common. As pope, he will definitely do that," he said.

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Fr. José Luis Romero Toscano, vicar of the St. Augustine parish in Chiclayo, recalled that when Leo came to celebrate Mass, "He wanted everything to be in order." He continued, "That tells you about a person who wanted to do things well, not only in the aspect of the liturgy … but also in the way he treated others, in his closeness to them.. (He's) a silent, virtuous and prayerful person."

Romero described his former bishop as someone who connected with people. "He was a person who did not avoid people approaching him," Romero said. "If you came over to ask him for a photo, ask him a question or talk to him, he would stop his secretary for a while and talk to you," he added. "It wasn't: I'm busy, I have to go."

Leo learned the nuances of the local language — including slang — and adjusted his vocabulary to connect with his audience.

"He always spoke in very simple language so that everyone could understand," Romero said. "Monsignor Prevost is intellectually very well-rounded (but) was approachable. In what way? He spoke simply to people. He didn't speak about Jesus, rather about his love."

Romero expresses pride in an Augustinian becoming pope. But he also feels a sense of responsibility.

"I know many fellow friars who have seen him develop, hold meetings, converse. So this is a source of pride, (but) a responsibility for us as Augustinians," he said. "We have to pray for him, accompany him, so that he doesn't feel alone, that he has the support of the friars."

Romero predicted: "He's a pastor who is going to help enormously in generating unity in the midst of our church's diversity. He's a good man.

For his part, Majail said, "I'm really looking forward to his first apostolic letter. There he's going to show his heart. And it's definitely going to appear like he's Peruvian since he's definitely from Latin America." He added, "The gesture to Leo XIII will be noticeable: Defending the campesino, the worker, those who have nothing, those who cry out."

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