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)



Matthew Casey-Pariseault

View Author Profile

The Conversation

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

May 19, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In his first appearance as Pope Leo XIV on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, the man born Robert Francis Prevost spoke for 10 minutes in Italian. Then he transitioned to Spanish and, with a big grin, gave a greeting to his "beloved diocese of Chiclayo in Peru."

Many Peruvians were overjoyed with the election of Leo, whom they are proud to claim as a fellow citizen. "The Pope is Peruvian!" reported the live coverage on Latina Noticias, one of the main national networks. Other news outlets around Lima, where I live, shared similar headlines. Within minutes, all of Peru knew that the new pope, who was born and raised in Chicago, had served in Peru for over two decades and was nationalized as a citizen in 2015.

Advertisement

During his time in the South American nation, he lived alongside his parishioners through a bloody civil war, a decade-long dictatorship and an unstable post-dictatorship period that has so far led to three former presidents being handed prison sentences. Amid these challenges, Prevost became part of Peruvian society — and, eventually, a leader within it.

Prevost's leadership roles in Chicago and Rome were essential in his formation. But as a scholar of religion in Latin America, I believe that it is his time in Peru that has

best prepared him to take on the challenges of directing the global Catholic Church. In Peru, where Catholicism permeates public life, Prevost encountered deep social and political challenges in ways that bishops in many other countries may never face so directly.

Missionary during war and dictatorship

Prevost first arrived in Peru in 1985. A member of the Order of St. Augustine, the young man had been sent to its mission in Chulucanas, in the northern province of Piura. Chulucanas is about 30 miles east of the regional capital, where the desert coast begins to rise up into the Andes.

After a year, Prevost left to finish his doctoral degree and serve briefly in Illinois. But he soon returned to Peru, serving as a missionary in the northern city of Trujillo. He stayed there through the remainder of the 1980s and 1990s, amid civil war between the government and various militant groups — primarily the Maoist guerrillas of Sendero Luminoso, or "Shining Path," who aimed to install a communist state.

Pope Leo XIV served in several areas of northern Peru



Map: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Created with Datawrapper

Click for full-size graphic

The violence hit other regions more severely, but Trujillo and the surrounding area were home to car bombs, sabotaged electrical grids and brutal military dragnet operations. Prevost accompanied Peruvians through some of the darkest days of the country's history.

During these years, Prevost trained future clergy and served as a parish priest. One fellow Augustinian recalled that Prevost played a key role in recruiting and training Peruvian candidates to the priesthood. Prevost also founded the Trujillo parish of Nuestra Señora de Montserrat, where his parishioners knew him as "Padre Roberto."

As the country transitioned away from the civil war period, which ultimately left nearly 70,000 dead, Prevost remained in Peru. During the 1990s, President Alberto Fujimori's government built a polarizing legacy by undermining democracy and citizenship rights while capturing the two most powerful guerrilla leaders.



Bishop Cristóbal Bernardo Mejía Corral of Chulucanas, Peru, shows images on the wall at the dining room of the house in Chulucanas, May 11, 2025, where then-Fr. Robert Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV, stayed as a young missionary. (OSV News/Reuters/Sebastian Castaneda)

As I show in my research, religion and politics are deeply intertwined in Peru. By the 1990s, the Peruvian Catholic Church was divided between members who spoke out in defense of human rights and those who defended the often brutal tactics of the government. Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne, who was then the archbishop of Ayacucho — the Andean stronghold of Sendero Luminoso — became a spokesperson for the pro-state faction, framing defenders of human rights as apologists for terrorism.

Prevost was among those who maintained a critical view of any party, including the government, that committed human rights abuses. Diego García-Sayán, the country's former minister of justice and foreign affairs, recently wrote an op-ed praising Prevost's willingness to speak out against attempts to legalize the death penalty and to defend embattled human rights organizations.

From Chiclayo to the Vatican

After returning to the United States in 1999, Prevost rose through the leadership ranks of the Augustinian order. He was sent back to Peru in 2014, when Pope Francis named him the apostolic administrator, and later bishop, of the northern diocese of Chiclayo.

As bishop, Prevost emerged as a voice for democracy and justice. In a 2017 public statement to national media, he urged former President Fujimori to "personally ask forgiveness for the great injustices that were committed and for which he was prosecuted."

During his tenure as bishop, Prevost helped guide his community through the COVID-19 pandemic. He also played a key role ministering to Chiclayo's growing population of Venezuelan migrants.



People from Peru hold up a banner saying Chiclayo, the diocese in Peru where the new Pope Leo XIV served as bishop from 2015 to 2023, as they join the pope for the 'Regina Coeli' prayer in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican May 11, 2025. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

Meanwhile, he was gaining the confidence of his peers, as well as Pope Francis. Prevost was given a leadership role in the Peruvian Conference of Bishops and played a central role during Francis' 2018 visit to Peru. In 2023, Francis named Prevost prefect of the Dicastery of Bishops, the oversight body for naming new bishops across the world.

Prevost took the position in Rome but was sad to leave Peru again. "This time, again, it will be hard for me to leave here," Prevost told Peruvian media.

In recent years, Prevost has taken on causes central to Francis' papacy. He was a key actor in the Vatican investigations of a Peruvian organization, Sodalicio de Vida Cristiana, which was found to have committed dozens of sexual and psychological abuses dating back to the 1970s. Francis dissolved the organization in 2025. Prevost

has also developed an increased focus on Indigenous and environmental rights, in line with Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*' and 2019 conference for bishops in the Amazon.

Local celebrations

Photographs and memes celebrating the Peruvian pope have flown around social media and WhatsApp groups in Peru. The photos of Prevost eating traditional dishes from the north coast are especially popular. AI-generated memes of the pope wearing the Peruvian national soccer jersey or eating ceviche with an Inca Kola soda are making the rounds.

In Chiclayo and Trujillo, in addition to official church celebrations, thousands have taken to the streets to express their joy with placards and chants.

Leo XIV has clearly brought the memory of his years in Peru with him to the Vatican. He has chosen Edgard Rimaycuna, a Peruvian priest whom the pope knew from his time in Chiclayo, as his personal secretary.

I believe the challenges that Leo guided his parishioners through in two decades in Peru should offer valuable lessons for the new pope to build on the legacy of Francis, the first Latin American pope.

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article.

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