Opinion
NCR Voices



Pope Leo XIV, the former Cardinal Robert F. Prevost, prays as he stands on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican after his election as pope May 8, 2025. The new pope was born in Chicago. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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When Cardinal Dominque Mamberti stepped onto the loggia of St. Peter's last Thursday, he said the famous words: *Annuntio vobis, gaudium magnam: Habemus papam!* "I announce to you a great joy: We have a pope!" The crowd went wild, cheering the news.

At that point, the people in the square did not know who had been chosen pope. They did not know what policies he would pursue or where he stood on any issue that confronts the church today. They knew only that an unnatural situation, a Catholic Church without a pope, had been corrected. They knew that the next time they went to Mass, they would pray for the new pope in the canon of the Mass. After less than two weeks of sede vacante, they knew that the bishop of Rome, focal point for the communion of the churches, had been selected. They knew the church had received a gift.

Not everyone reacted to this gift the same way.

Shortly after the decision was announced, Raymond Arroyo went on Laura Ingraham's show where he voiced concern that Pope Leo XIV had indicated he would pursue a synodal church. "For those who don't understand that term, frankly the cardinals themselves don't, they're still defining it, but what it really means is democratizing the decision-making and the doctrine in the church." No, synodal processes are not about democratizing the church. They invite the people of God into the ecclesial process of discernment. Bishops enter synods as bishops, and laypeople as laypeople. Synodal structures are second nature to anyone who belongs to a religious order. Portraying synodality as some modern, newfangled intrusion is ridiculous.

Arroyo wants to preserve a narrative. He recognizes that more than two-thirds plus one of the cardinals selected someone who was committed to Francis' reforms. Instead of thinking that it is time for some soul-searching, Arroyo simply plans to lazily apply his prior criticisms of Francis to Leo.

Others were trying to draw contrasts between Francis and Leo XIV, obscuring the obvious fact that the cardinals had selected a candidate committed to the late pope's reforms. "He has started well," Archbishop Georg Gänswein, former secretary to Benedict XVI, told Corriere della Sera. "Now a new phase begins. I sense a certain widespread relief. The season of arbitrariness is over."



Pope Francis greets then-Cardinal Robert F. Prevost during a consistory in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Sept. 30, 2023. U.S.-born Cardinal Prevost became the first pope from the U.S. in history when he was elected at the Vatican on May 8, 2025, choosing the papal name Leo XIV. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Arbitrariness? I doubt Gänswein means Francis' decision to bypass a dozen long-serving members of the Vatican diplomatic corps to appoint the German former secretary a nuncio in Lithuania. Most nuncios begin their careers serving in poor countries in the Global South. Francis let Gänswein skip to the head of the line and get a plum European appointment. Yes, that struck some people as arbitrary.

Gänswein is simply trying to sow ill will where none exists.

Patrick Coffin, a right-wing social media personality, called attention to a video of Pope Leo walking through a crowd. The pope is greeting people to his left and his right but Coffin thinks the new pope avoided people holding a rainbow flag. "We would not have seen this under Francis," he intoned. It is "a big sea change." Except in Europe, the rainbow flag is more often associated with peace movements than it is with gay rights.

Coffin's myopic and ideologically driven vision can't account for such complicating facts, and so he ignores them.

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Progressive Catholics also have donned some blinders.

Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, issued a statement welcoming the selection of Cardinal Robert Prevost as pope, but also expressing concerns about previous statements he had made. DeBernardo said, "Pope Francis opened the door to a new approach to LGBTQ+ people; Pope Leo must now guide the church through that door." Must? That is a strange choice of verb when speaking about someone who has just been elected supreme pontiff.

I understand that the head of an advocacy organization is going to advocate, but is it expecting too much of a group with the word "ministry" in its title to voice some joy at the election of a new pope without qualification?

Some efforts to interpret the new pope are relatively benign, except that they may mislead, or create a narrative that distorts our understanding of the new pope. Conservatives are pinning their hopes for a more conservative papacy on the fact the new pope wore a mozzetta, a short red cape, when he first appeared on the loggia of St. Peter's after his election. The National Catholic Register, however, noted that in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI was wearing a black, not a white cassock, underneath his white rochet and red mozzetta, possibly because he forgot to change. Who knows? Sometimes, things happen that have no ulterior significance.

Besides, the interesting point of congruence between Benedict XVI and Leo XIV is not their choice in clothing but their shared love of Augustine. That is something

worth paying attention to in the weeks ahead.

My colleague Fr. Tom Reese speculated about the pope's Peruvian passport. "He [Prevost] even became a Peruvian citizen because he thought he was going to spend the rest of his life in Peru," Reese observed. Prevost may or may not have thought he was going to spend the rest of his life in Peru, but the more likely reason he got a Peruvian passport is because Article 7 of the accord between the Holy See and the government of Peru requires all bishops to be citizens.

I counsel a bit of patience. Of course, we are all eager to learn more about the new pope, but this effort to attach significance to things that may be ephemeral or accidental is a fool's errand. His homily at the inaugural Mass on Sunday will be significant, the first talk he writes himself. His choice of a new prefect of the Dicastery of Bishops will be significant. Let's wait to see what he discloses about himself before rushing to squeeze him into narratives that were at hand no matter who was elected pope. Let this papacy be what it in fact is: new.

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