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Pope Leo XIV, formerly Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, waves as he arrives to celebrate his i

Pope Leo XIV waves as he arrives to celebrate his inauguration Mass at the Vatican May 18, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Claudia Greco)



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Pope Leo XIV, in his inaugural Mass as the newly elected pontiff, cast a vision of a united church that offers God's unconditional love to everyone.

"We are called to offer God's love to everyone, in order to achieve that unity which does not cancel out differences but values the personal history of each person and the social and religious culture of every people," he said on May 18 before a crowd of 200,000 gathered in a sun-drenched St. Peter's Square.

"I would like that our first great desire be for a united church, a sign of unity and communion, which becomes a leaven for a reconciled world," the new pope said. "Brothers and sisters, this is the hour for love."

Leo's homily echoed many of the same themes that he first spoke about during his first appearance on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica on the night of his election on May 8.

Pope Leo XIV blesses the faithful in St. Peter's Square with holy water at the beginning of his

Pope Leo XIV blesses the faithful in St. Peter's Square with holy water at the beginning of his installation Mass at the Vatican May 18, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Ten days after his election, history's first pope from the United States and the first member of the Augustinian order to be elected pontiff made it clear he intends to use his new platform to emphasize a message of peace and love to counter a divided world at war.

Christians, he said, must offer a different witness "so that all may experience God's embrace."

"We want to be a small leaven of unity, communion and fraternity within the world," Leo said.

The pope's inauguration Mass was attended by 30 heads of state and nine sovereigns, along with 200 cardinals and 750 bishops and priests. The U.S. delegation was led by Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, both of whom are Roman Catholic.

Among the other notable world leaders were Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, French Prime Minister François Bayrou, Canadian Prime Minister Mark

Carney, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Israeli President Isaac Herzog, and President Dina Boluarte of Peru, where Cardinal Robert Prevost served as a missionary and bishop for nearly 20 years prior to his election as pope.

Also in attendance were representatives from most major Christian traditions and other faiths.

Pope Leo XIV, formerly Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, waves at the conclusion of his inaugu

Pope Leo XIV waves at the conclusion of his inauguration Mass at the Vatican May 18, 2025. (OSV News/Claudia Greco, Reuters)

In St. Peter's Square, thousands gathered beneath the sun to witness what many described as a moment of living history. Among them were Jackie Rodriguez, 67, who had traveled to Rome with her husband from Dallas, Texas. She said she was thrilled to be present when white smoke signaled the election of Pope Leo XIV.

"We didn't even know who he was," Rodriguez said. "We loved him from the beginning, and to be able to be here again for this Mass is the greatest gift our trip to Rome could have given us."

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Rodriguez said she was proud of his missionary journey. "As Americans, we are very proud, even though we know he lived much longer in Peru. It makes us proud that his mission started from the United States and from there around the world," she said.

"He is a son of our church."

Maria Cerruti, 37, attended with her husband Edoardo and their two sons. "There are actually five of us, because I'm pregnant," she said with a smile. "It's important that in his homily he talked about unity and peace. We don't know where the world is going, but at least we know that the pope will always call everyone back to the duty of peace."

A group of young pilgrims from Sicily rested near the left colonnade of St. Peter's Square, seeking shade from the sweltering spring heat of Rome.

Giulia Nicodemi, 20, spoke with conviction about her faith. "We will definitely go to the next World Youth Day wherever it is," she said. "This pope's smile gives me tranquility and peace, and I believe he will be able to change many things inside the church, although he may need time."

Pope Leo XIV, formerly Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, greets U.S. Vice President JD Vance a

Pope Leo XIV greets U.S. Vice President JD Vance and his wife, Usha Vance, far left, after the pontiff celebrated his inauguration Mass at the Vatican May 18, 2025. (OSV News/Claudia Greco, pool via Reuters)

Amid such geopolitical and religious diversity, Leo took stock of the fractured state of world affairs.

"In this our time, we still see too much discord, too many wounds caused by hatred, violence, prejudice, the fear of difference, and an economic paradigm that exploits the earth's resources and marginalizes the poorest," he said.

Christians from other traditions, people of other faiths and all men and women of goodwill must work together to "build a new world where peace reigns." he said.

The installation Mass of Leo was marked by solemnity, rich symbolism, and global representation, reflecting the universality of the Catholic Church.

The ceremony began with the pontiff praying at the tomb of St. Peter, who according to Catholic tradition is considered to be the first pope. Leo arrived inside St. Peter's Basilica before leading a procession of cardinals, Eastern patriarchs, bishops, and parish priests of Rome into the main altar in the square.

At the altar in the square, the icon of Our Lady of Good Counsel from the Marian shrine in Genazzano was prominently displayed, signifying Leo's personal devotion to the image that has long been under the protection of the Augustine order.

Pope Leo XIV greets the faithful while riding the popemobile through St. Peter's Square before

Pope Leo XIV greets the faithful while riding the popemobile through St. Peter's Square before celebrating his installation Mass at the Vatican May 18, 2025. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

The pope opened the liturgy singing the initial salute, blessing the gathered assembly with holy water in remembrance of baptism — a gesture that underscored his commitment to shepherding the faithful.

The readings during the Mass were delivered in multiple languages. The first reading was proclaimed in Spanish, followed by a responsorial psalm in Italian, the second reading in English, and the Gospel sung in Latin. In a nod to Eastern Catholic tradition, the Gospel was also sung in Greek, marking a rhythmic and deeply reverent moment in the liturgy.

Following the Gospel proclamation, Leo received the papal pallium and the fisherman's ring, known as the Piscator, from three cardinals from each order within the College of Cardinals: the nuncio in Syria, Italian Cardinal Mario Zenari, Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu, archbishop of Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Filipino Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, pro-prefect of the Dicastery for the Evangelization of Peoples.



A view from above of the pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican during the installation Mass of Pope Leo XIV on May 18, 2025 (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

As the pope received the ring, symbolizing his apostolic mission and link with St. Peter, the tens of thousands of congregants gathered in St. Peter's Square erupted into prolonged applause.

The pallium — a strip of white wool embroidered with five red crosses — symbolizes the pope's pastoral mission and communion with the universal church. It is crafted by the Benedictine nuns of Santa Cecilia in Urbe, using wool from lambs blessed by Trappist monks each year on the feast of St. Agnes on Jan. 21. The pallium is secured with three pins resembling the nails of Christ's crucifixion and is worn across the shoulders as a mark of papal authority.

The fisherman's ring, delivered by Tagle, is made of pure gold and engraved with the image of St. Peter's boat alongside the new pope's name. Traditionally used as a seal for papal documents, the ring is now purely symbolic, destined to be destroyed upon the pontiff's death.

Priests gather in St. Peter's Square for Pope Leo XIV's installation Mass at the Vatican May 18

Priests gather in St. Peter's Square for Pope Leo XIV's installation Mass at the Vatican May 18, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

As the choir sang "Tu es Petrus" ("You are Peter") in Latin, a procession followed, with representatives from all sectors of the church paying homage to the new pope. This included the first cardinals of each order – episcopal, presbyteral and diaconal – along with a bishop, a priest, a deacon, two superiors general (one male and one female), and two married couples, symbolizing the breadth and unity of the global Catholic community.

Leo's homily began with a quote from St. Augustine: "Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

The ten-minute address was interrupted by applause nine times. A particularly strong response erupted when he acknowledged Pope Francis, and the applause

grew louder when he spoke of his own unworthiness for the papacy.

"I was chosen, without any merit of my own, and now, with fear and trembling, I come to you as a brother, who desires to be the servant of your faith and your joy, walking with you on the path of God's love, for he wants us all to be united in one family," he said.

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Leo used his homily to call the church toward humility and pledged to lead by example.

"Peter must shepherd the flock without ever yielding to the temptation to be an autocrat, lording it over those entrusted to him," he said.

The office of the pope "is never a question of capturing others by force, by religious propaganda or by means of power," Leo said. "Instead, it is always and only a question of loving as Jesus did."

The prayers of the faithful also represented the Catholic Church’s linguistic and cultural diversity with prayers offered in Portuguese, French, Arabic, Polish and Chinese.

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