Opinion
NCR Voices



Pope Leo XIV, formerly Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, waves at the conclusion of his inauguration Mass at the Vatican May 18, 2025. He is the first U.S. pope in history. (OSV News/Reuters/Guglielmo Mangiapane)



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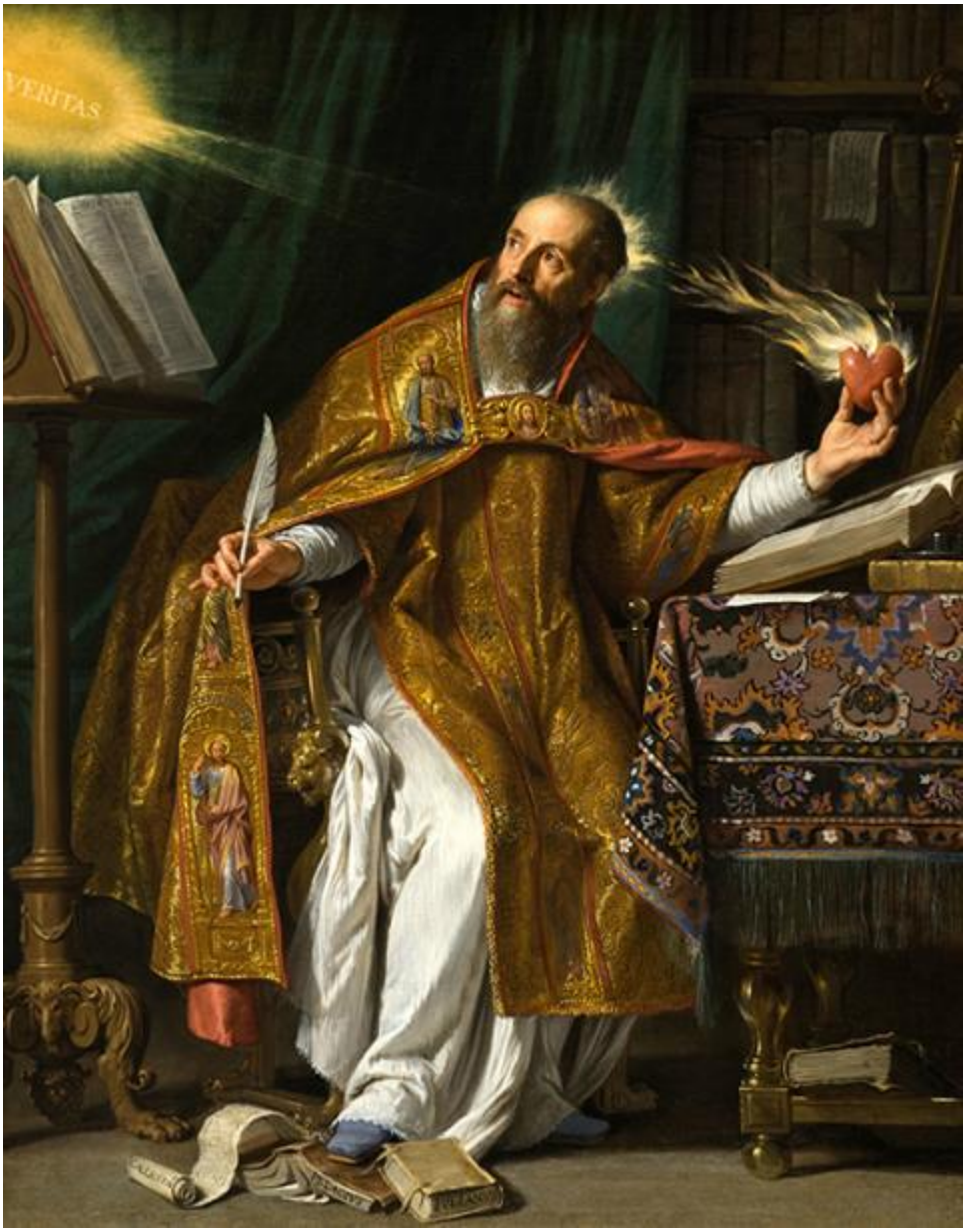
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In 2007, when Pope Benedict XVI traveled to the Basilica of St. Pietro in Ciel d'Oro in Pavia, Italy, to venerate the earthly remains of St. Augustine, he spoke of his gratitude to the great Western church father, "who played such an important part in my life as a theologian and a Pastor, but, I would say, even more as a man and a priest."

Benedict called Augustine the "*Doctor gratiae*" or "Doctor of grace."

"The Letter to the Hebrews [10:12-14] has set us before Christ, the eternal High Priest, exalted to the Father's glory after offering himself as the one perfect sacrifice of the New Covenant in which the work of Redemption was accomplished," the pope said. "St. Augustine fixed his gaze on this mystery and in it he found the Truth he was so ardently seeking. Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, the Sacrificed and Risen Lamb, is the Face of God-Love for every human being on his journey along the paths of time towards eternity."

It is this Augustinian focus on the singularity of the event of Jesus Christ, "the one perfect sacrifice," and its decisive character for the life of all Christians, that was arguably the central focus of Benedict's magisterial teachings.



This is a 17th-century painting of St. Augustine by artist Philippe de Champaigne. The saint lived in the years 354-430 and is considered a church father and doctor of the church. (OSV News/Los Angeles County Museum of Art, public domain)

Welcoming the pope to the church that day was the general of the Augustinian order, Fr. Robert Francis Prevost.

Pope Leo XIV officially inaugurated his ministry on Sunday (May 18) with a Mass concelebrated by the cardinals who had elected him on May 8. Leo is the first member of the Augustinian order to be elected pope but, as the encounter in Pavia demonstrated, Augustine's influence is wide. How that Augustinian influence shapes

the new pontificate will be a major consideration for all of us as we begin to walk with our new Holy Father.

We saw it clearly in Leo's sermon at the inaugural Mass. "How can Peter carry out this task [of evangelization]?" Leo asked. "The Gospel tells us that it is possible only because his own life was touched by the infinite and unconditional love of God, even in the hour of his failure and denial."

Here, again, we see the singularity of the Christ event. The adverb "only" attests to it. It is the grace of Christ that precedes all of our human prayer, all our ministry, all our good deeds, and only that grace.

Later in his homily, the new pope said, "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. For our part, we want to be a small leaven of unity, communion and fraternity within the world. We want to say to the world, with humility and joy: Look to Christ! Come closer to him! Welcome his word that enlightens and consoles!" This is textbook Augustine: Against the backdrop of a sinful, even deranged world, Christ's call is sure, it "enlightens and consoles," it builds the church.

We saw this Augustinian influence, too, in Leo's address to the members of the diplomatic corps on May 16.

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"Truly peaceful relationships cannot be built, also within the international community, apart from truth," Pope Leo said. "Where words take on ambiguous and ambivalent connotations, and the virtual world, with its altered perception of reality, takes over unchecked, it is difficult to build authentic relationships, since the objective and real premises of communication are lacking. ... Furthermore, from the Christian perspective, truth is not the affirmation of abstract and disembodied principles, but an encounter with the person of Christ himself, alive in the midst of the community of believers."

In his famous essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox" on Tolstoy's view of history, Sir Isaiah Berlin began by recalling a line from the Greek poet Archilochus: "The fox

knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Berlin argued that, whatever the original meaning of these words, they could be taken to describe two distinct and recognizable types of writer and thinker. The hedgehogs "relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel." The foxes "pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way."

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In Berlin's taxonomy, Dante, Plato, Lucretius, Pascal, Hegel and Dostoevsky were all hedgehogs and Shakespeare, Herodotus, Aristotle, Erasmus, Goethe, Pushkin and Joyce were foxes. The burden of his essay was that Tolstoy was, by nature, a fox who desperately wanted to be a hedgehog.

Augustine is, like Tolstoy, difficult to classify, but in the end, it is his hedgehog qualities that predominate. I am not a scholar of Augustine, but I would venture that the "one big thing" that Augustine knew is that God's grace suffices, and *only* God's grace suffices.

Christ's passion, death and resurrection are as decisive for St. Thomas Aquinas as they are for Augustine, so what is the difference? I would put it this way. It is hard to imagine an existentialist, say Kierkegaard or Camus, engaging with Thomas' summa. It is comprehensive, didactic and legalistic. But they would talk with Augustine long into the night. His approach is personal, dramatic and evocative.

> Now, in Leo XIV, the universal church will be reacquainted with Augustine in new ways. Buckle up.
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The Catholic Church needs both schools of thought just as it needs a variety of religious orders. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are many and varied. Still, there is

something exciting about Leo being an Augustinian, exciting intellectually but also in terms of missionary witness. Augustine was a convert and he never lost a convert's zeal. He understood, too, that conversion is a lifelong struggle for all Christians. Augustine is a theologian of real life; He seems ever fresh because he is never lost in his own intellectual machinations. He has as much to say to our troubled world as he had to say to the troubled world of the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

Now, in Leo XIV, the universal church will be reacquainted with Augustine in new ways. Buckle up. When an Augustinian friar from Germany went to Rome in the early sixteenth century, he kicked off the Reformation! We need not have any such fears about our Augustinian pope, but we should still buckle up. Augustine will always be something of a hot potato intellectually. Pope Leo is someone who has lived under Augustine's rule, and not just under his theology. How that shapes his pontificate remains to be seen but, already, we can see that the great bishop of Hippo will exert a powerful influence on the new bishop of Rome.

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