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Then-Bishop Robert Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV, stands in floodwaters in the Chiclayo Diocese in the aftermath of heavy rains in northwestern Peru in March 2023, in this screenshot from a video by Caritas Chiclayo (NCR screengrab/Caritas Chiclayo)



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The photo shows a man wearing a simple, short-sleeved white shirt and gray pants with a bishop’s cross around his neck standing in floodwaters up to the shins of his black rubber boots.

A somber look rests on his face as he scans a village inundated with high brown water. In another photo, his head hangs low as he walks with two men and a woman down a street turned canal.

The images of then-Bishop Robert Francis Prevost in the muddy aftermath of severe flooding in northern Peru in 2023 offer a glance at a man the world now knows as Pope Leo XIV.

Photos of "a pope in muddy boots" began circulating on social media shortly after Prevost, an Augustinian friar-turned-cardinal with both U.S. and Peruvian citizenship, was introduced in St. Peter's Square as the 267th pope of the Roman Catholic Church.

The story behind the images tells of a pastor in close kinship with his community, said Manuel Alberto Huapaya Mendoza, secretary general of Caritas Peru, the national chapter of the Catholic church’s international aid and development organization Caritas Internationalis.

"He's a human being who's close to the people and shares their suffering. He's also capable of understanding their lived reality, because he's there with them," Huapaya said via a translator.

Huapaya began as director of Caritas Peru in January 2022, near the end of Prevost's time as bishop of Chiclayo, a diocese off the Pacific Ocean coast in the northwest corner of the country. At the time, Prevost was vice president of Caritas' episcopal

board.



A man carries a table through a street flooded by heavy rains of Cyclone Yaku, March 12, 2023, in Chiclayo, Peru. (AP photo/Aldair Mejia)

In March 2023, Cyclone Yaku pummeled the region with torrential rains for nearly three weeks. The storm, the first cyclone in 40 years to strike the Pacific coast country, drenched the northwest region, breaching river banks and triggering devastating landslides.

The heavy rains brought by the storm impacted more than 800,000 people across Peru and left over 123,000 people homeless, according to the United Nations. More than 48,000 homes were destroyed or made inhabitable, about 400 health centers were impacted and 240 miles of roads were damaged. At least 99 people died, and 13 were missing, as of April 2023.

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The Peruvian government declared a national state of emergency in three regions that included Chiclayo. The flooding, along with an extreme heat wave, fueled the worst dengue outbreak in Peru's history.

Caritas Peru provided humanitarian assistance to more than 5,000 families impacted by the cyclone. That included food, building materials, clothing and hygiene products. Cash was also dispersed to hundreds of families for basic needs through a project partially funded by Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas development organization, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID.

In the middle of the relief effort was Prevost.



In the aftermath of the 2023 severe floods in northwestern Peru, Pope Leo XIV, then the bishop of Chiclayo, assisted with relief efforts led by the national chapter of Caritas, the Catholic Church's humanitarian aid organization. (Courtesy of Caritas Chiclayo)

The bishop of Chiclayo waded through flooded streets as he toured damage in flooded parts of Íllimo, one of the small towns devastated by rising water. Standing in the back of a pickup truck, he distributed relief supplies and helped deliver them to families. Wielding a ladle at a soup kitchen, he served meals to people whose homes were damaged or destroyed. All a few weeks before he departed for Rome in his new position as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops.

"One of the final messages I'm sharing from the Diocese of Chiclayo before my upcoming change is about Íllimo, one of the villages that have suffered tremendous damage due to the flooding and rains during this time. Many villages throughout the diocese have been affected," Prevost said in Spanish in a video promoting Caritas' "Peru de la Mano" campaign to assist people impacted by the heavy rains.

"We have been visiting all the villages, and little by little, trying to offer what we can, offering a hand to the families suffering the most and to the thousands and thousands of people who have been affected and have lost their homes because of these rains," he said. "I ask you to be generous. I ask you to open your hearts and help one another move forward, as we have done during other moments of crisis."

For a bishop who kept a low profile, Prevost's presence amid the floodwaters wasn't about publicity, said Huapaya, but a reflection of his relationship with the community.

"He's a man who is dedicated to his people, and he is dedicated to his tasks," he said.

The image of a bishop wading through flooded streets is not a common one, said Roberto Rojas, a Catholic Relief Services official who works closely with bishops. For him, the photos invoked the "shepherd with the smell of a sheep" ministry championed by Pope Francis.

"When I see him in flooded waters with the people, I immediately think of Luke [4:18]," Rojas said in an email, which in part says "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor."



In March 2023, then-Bishop Robert Prevost helped deliver relief supplies to victims of massive flooding throughout his Diocese of Chiclayo in northwestern Peru. (Courtesy of Caritas Chiclayo)

The 2023 flood was the final weather-related disaster to hit northwest Peru during Prevost's time in Chiclayo. But it was far from the first. Storms, mudslides and wildfires are commonplace in the region, Huapaya said. Extreme precipitation events have increased in Peru in recent years, and are projected to rise more due to climate change.

The Caritas Peru secretary general said that Prevost was "very knowledgeable" about climate change and "especially close to Pope Francis and identified with his message" in "*Laudato Si*', on Care for our Common Home" and other writings. During Caritas meetings, Prevost would discuss environmental issues and lend support to the aid agency's work around sustainability, climate resilience and ecology.

"In meetings, he was very supportive of any project that had to do with caring for the environment. And he was a bishop that was greatly preoccupied with these problems, I guess, because he saw them as signs of the times," Huapaya said.



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)

In 2016, Prevost participated in a pastoral meeting in Chiclayo organized by the Episcopal Conference of Peru on environmental issues to mark the one-year anniversary of Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si*'. Laura Vargas, who was working for the conference at the time, said the topic interested him.

"He is very sensitive to the pain and suffering of humble people, and of those affected by environmental phenomena in general," said Vargas, who is national coordinator for Interfaith Rainforest Initiative Peru. "I have no doubt that he will always have a message and a commitment to this matter."

With Prevost now pope, Huapaya believes his experiences in Peru will shape how he engages from the Vatican the environmental questions facing the planet and its

people.

"Now that the pope has a greater role, that he has much more authority, he will also be a great champion for the common home, as Pope Francis said."

Read this next: Before he was pope, Leo XIV said it's time for action on climate change
This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** and **Looking for Leo in History** feature series.