Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Leo XIV greets a diplomat during an audience with the Vatican diplomatic corps in the Apostolic Palace's Clementine Hall at the Vatican May 16, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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The purpose of Vatican diplomacy is not to seek privileges, but to strengthen its evangelical mission at the service of humanity, Pope Leo XIV told diplomats in his first major foreign policy address on May 16.

Peace, justice and truth will be the pillars of the Catholic Church's missionary activity and the aim of the Holy See's diplomacy in his papacy, he said.

Cardinal Robert Prevost was not an experienced diplomat like Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state who was considered the frontrunner in the lead-up to the papal conclave that elected Prevost. But neither was Pope Francis a trained diplomat, yet he did very well on the world stage.

On the other hand, Leo is not ignorant of the world. He is the most well-traveled person ever elected pope, having visited 47 countries while he was prior general of the Augustinian religious order. Francis hardly traveled outside of Argentina before becoming pope.

Now, as head of one of the most ancient and influential entities in the world of diplomacy, Leo will have to get up to speed quickly on the international issues facing the world. Everyone is watching to see if he is up to the job.

Aiding him on international issues is a highly professional diplomatic establishment in the Vatican secretariat of state with nunciatures (embassies) in almost every

country.

In the foreign policy address to foreign diplomats accredited to the Holy See, Leo did not depart from previous Vatican policy but gave it his own personal spin. He said he and the church aspire "to reach out and embrace all individuals and peoples on the Earth, who need and yearn for truth, justice and peace."

His own life experience, he said, "has been marked by this aspiration to transcend borders in order to encounter different peoples and cultures." Although born in the United States, he spent 20 years of ministry in Peru.

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Leo promised to follow his "predecessor, ever attentive to the cry of the poor, the needy and the marginalized." He also noted Francis' focus on contemporary challenges, such as protection of creation, and artificial intelligence.

Leo pledged to strengthen understanding and dialogue with the countries of the diplomats.

The core of his message focused on the three words he considers the aim of Vatican diplomacy: peace, justice and truth.

Peace, he insisted, is not simply the absence of war but a gift of Christ. It demands "first of all that we work on ourselves. Peace is built in the heart and from the heart, by eliminating pride and vindictiveness and carefully choosing our words."

He said he believes "religions and interreligious dialogue can make a fundamental contribution to fostering a climate of peace," as did Francis. But Leo argued, "This naturally requires full respect for religious freedom in every country, since religious experience is an essential dimension of the human person. Without it, it is difficult, if not impossible, to bring about the purification of the heart necessary for building peaceful relationships."

He then made a strong pitch to reinvigorate multilateral diplomacy and engage international institutions, as opposed to the go-it-alone approach popular today. He also reiterated Francis' message given on Easter, April 20, the day before his death, that no peace is "possible without true disarmament." Francis did not want a

nation's defense requirement to "turn into a race to rearmament."

The second word Leo focused on is justice, without which peace is impossible. He said he believes that, like his predecessor Leo XIII, we live in a time of epochal change.

"The Holy See cannot fail to make its voice heard in the face of the many imbalances and injustices that lead to unworthy working conditions and increasingly fragmented and conflict-ridden societies," Leo XIV said. This requires that "every effort should be made to overcome the global inequalities — between opulence and destitution — that are carving deep divides between continents, countries and even within individual societies."

He said government leaders need "to work to build harmonious and peaceful civil societies" by investing in families of heterosexual couples and respecting the dignity of every person, "especially the most frail and vulnerable, from the unborn to the elderly, from the sick to the unemployed, citizens and immigrants alike."



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The first pope from the United States noted he was "a citizen, the descendant of immigrants, who in turn chose to emigrate."

Finally, he turned to truth, which is necessary for peaceful relations.

"Where words take on ambiguous and ambivalent connotations, and the virtual world, with its altered perception of reality, takes over unchecked," he warned, "it is difficult to build authentic relationships since the objective and real premises of communication are lacking."

He indicated he will not pull his punches when speaking truth about humanity and the world, even "resorting whenever necessary to blunt language that may initially create misunderstanding." In previous papacies, the media has tended to give more attention to the papacy's blunt words on abortion and gender than on justice and peace.

But "truth," he said, "can never be separated from charity, which always has at its root a concern for the life and well-being of every man and woman." Thus while he will emphasize that the family is founded upon the stable union between a man and a woman, he will demand that everyone be treated with love and respect.

"Truth," he believes, "does not create division, but rather enables us to confront all the more resolutely the challenges of our time, such as migration, the ethical use of artificial intelligence and the protection of our beloved planet Earth."

He concluded with a note to hope. He believes we "can build a world in which everyone can lead an authentically human life in truth, justice and peace.

"It is my hope that this will be the case everywhere, starting with those places that suffer most grievously, like Ukraine and the Holy Land," he said.

In his first appearance on the international diplomacy stage, Leo showed he was up to the task.

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