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Pope Leo XIV rides through St. Peter's Square at the Vatican May 21, 2025, before holding his first weekly general audience. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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In his first address the night of his election as Pope Leo XIV, the new pontiff sketched out a vision of his papacy in just 500 words.

Outlining an ambitious agenda, Leo said he wanted to:

- Continue Pope Francis' synodal process to reform the church structures to make them more inclusive and welcoming;
- Use his papacy to promote peace, both inside the church and within the world;
- Lead the church to "build bridges with dialogue and encounter" with other Christians, followers of other faiths, and those with no faith at all.

Leo celebrated his inaugural Mass on May 18 as the new pope and in the span of just one week, he has backed up those initial words with further action.

The day after the inauguration, Leo met with the representatives of the ecumenical and interfaith groups who had traveled to Rome for the occasion.

"As bishop of Rome, I consider one of my priorities to be that of seeking the reestablishment of full and visible communion among all those who profess the same faith in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit," he told them.

Set against the backdrop of the upcoming 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea — which helped formulate the creed shared by Christian churches — Leo said that this is the moment for urgent action to unite as one body. The new pope is also expected to travel to Turkey to celebrate that milestone anniversary later this year in what is likely to be his first international trip.



Pope Leo XIV poses for a group photo with religious leaders who came to Rome for his inauguration Mass, during a meeting at the Vatican May 19, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

He also used the occasion to reaffirm his commitment to synodality, despite those in the conclave who might have been eager to bury the project alongside the late pontiff.

"I would like to assure you of my intention to continue Pope Francis' commitment to promoting the synodal nature of the Catholic Church and developing new and concrete forms for an ever stronger synodality in ecumenical relations," said Leo.

Speaking to other religious leaders present, Leo also gave his backing to the 2019 landmark document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," which was signed by Francis and Ahmed el-Tayeb, the grand imam of al-Azhar in Egypt. The document — often derided by traditionalist Catholic groups — is widely considered a major advancement in the Catholic Church's relationship with the Muslim world.

And at a time when Jewish-Catholic relations have been strained due to Israel's war on Gaza and Francis' frequent criticisms of it, Leo used the occasion for a reset in relations.

"The theological dialogue between Christians and Jews remains ever important and close to my heart," he said. "Even in these difficult times, marked by conflicts and misunderstandings, it is necessary to continue the momentum of this precious dialogue of ours."

But the next day — at his first Wednesday general audience in St. Peter's Square — he didn't hesitate to use his new bully pulpit to tell the 40,000 pilgrims that had gathered there not to look away from what was happening in Gaza.

"The situation in the Gaza Strip is increasingly worrying and painful," Leo said. "I renew my heartfelt appeal to allow the entry of dignified humanitarian aid and to put an end to the hostilities, the heart-rending price of which is being paid by children, the elderly and the sick."

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The spirit of bridge-building and dialogue that he preached from day one was given concrete expression when on Monday, May 19, history's first-ever pope from the United States held his first meeting with U.S. Vice President JD Vance.

Prior to his election, then-Cardinal Robert Prevost had used his social media account to take direct aim at the Catholic convert's efforts to use theology to defend the Trump administration's migrant crackdown. "JD Vance is wrong: Jesus doesn't ask us to rank our love for others," was the headline from a National Catholic Reporter article the cardinal had shared on Feb. 3.

Despite potential tensions between the two men, Vance used his visit to the Apostolic Palace to invite the new pope to the White House — a trip that doesn't seem likely anytime soon. Leo has made it clear there's much housekeeping to do at the Vatican. And for an institution that has historically been reluctant to even consider the possibility of electing an American for the top job, he is unlikely to prioritize a trip to his homeland straight away.

At his general audience, Leo paid tribute to Francis, noting that it had been once a month since his death on Easter Monday.

The new pope on May 22 followed Francis' practice of elevating women into top-level positions in the Roman Curia. Leo named Sr. Tiziana Merletti, a canon lawyer, as secretary of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Merletti, former superior general of the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor, succeeds Consolata Missionary Sr. Simona Brambilla, the first woman to head a Vatican dicastery.

The new pontiff also made an unannounced visit this week to his old office at the Vatican's Dicastery for Bishops to celebrate Mass and visit with his former staff.

Perhaps the spontaneity of the "pope of surprises," as his predecessor was known, lives on in Leo.

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