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People hold newspapers in Chiclayo, Peru, May 9, 2025, reporting on the election of Pope Leo XIV, who is a dual U.S.-Peruvian citizen. (OSV News/Reuters/Sebastian Castaneda)



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CHICLAYO, Peru — May 29, 2025
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Twenty days into his papacy, Pope Leo XIV's appointment style remains largely unknown — but his years leading the Diocese of Chiclayo, Peru, may offer clues. There, he prioritized lay leadership, promoted synodality and worked across ecclesial factions.

César Piscoya arrived in the Diocese of Chiclayo in 2017 at the invitation of the then-Bishop Robert Francis Prevost — now Leo — to serve as executive secretary of the social vicariate. But his appointment to a position in church government drew grumblings from priests in the northern Peruvian diocese, which Piscoya and other church observers describe as having had a culture of clericalism.

"I encountered the greatest resistance from the clergy because they found it very difficult to understand that a layperson could coordinate, lead and accompany these processes that were the responsibility of a priest," Piscoya told OSV News.

"There was a pastoral vicar, who was a priest, but it was in name only," he recalled. "(Leo) told me: 'Let's work urgently on communion, church unity, but also on shared responsibility,'" which he said involved Piscoya leading a pastoral animation team "responsible for the animation of the parish community where we were as a church."

Leo entrusted many lay Catholics with leadership positions in Chiclayo, where he served as bishop from 2015 until his elevation to cardinal in 2023 and appointment as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops.

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Empowering the laity reflected only a small part of his vision for church governance. As a bishop, he emphasized social and youth ministries, promoted synodality and championed greater roles for women in the church.

He also built bridges with the priests he inherited — many of whom had served under the Opus Dei bishops leading the diocese for six decades until then-Fr. Prevost's appointment as bishop.

"He's a person who isn't guided by ecclesiastical factions. That's to say he works with everyone; he works with whoever he has to work with," said Aldo Llanos, a professor of philosophy and anthropology at the University of Piura.

Leo's approach to church government in Chiclayo offers insight into how his papacy might unfold, according to analysts and former colleagues in Peru. As a bishop, he heeded Pope Francis' admonition of taking the church to the peripheries and prioritizing the poor.

Church observers describe the new pope as a patient listener who will talk to anybody but avoids speaking off-the-cuff. They also describe him as respectful of popular piety not straying from doctrine.

"He's a man who could ride a horse up into the hills, who could wear rubber boots during a flood. But when it came to the liturgy, especially at 8 p.m. Mass in the cathedral, he was always impeccably dressed," Llanos said. "On doctrinal matters, he obviously wasn't confrontational, as is his style. But when he had to say things, he said them clearly."

Fr. Ángel Peña, pastor of St. Martin of Tours Parish in Chiclayo — who received a birthday message from Pope Leo on May 10 — described his former bishop as "centrist," a prelate who was pastorally focused, but doctrinally strict.

"(He's) very protective of the liturgy," Peña said. He added, however, that Leo "didn't like" priests denying people documents. "Don't make people suffer, please. Pay attention to them," he recalled Leo telling him. "'I give you the authorization. Attend to them.' He was sensitive in that way."

The pope put the poor first in Chiclayo, a downtrodden region of rice and cane farming some 480 miles north of Lima. He waded into the mud left by catastrophic floods — with a photo of him standing in flood waters going viral after he was elected pope. He mobilized a diocesan response to a wave of Venezuelan migrants arriving in Chiclayo and raised the funds to purchase and install three oxygen plants during the pandemic.

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"(Bishop) Prevost turned us toward social, humanitarian issues," said Janina Sesa, diocesan Cáritas director. "He said, 'Promoting the person is also evangelizing.' That's what he instilled in us."

Leo, the first Agustinian pontiff, promoted a different vision of the church, too — one inspired by the charism of the Order of St. Augustine and matching the vision of Francis.

He spoke of the Second Vatican Council upon arriving in Chiclayo — a topic previously not mentioned often by priests, according to church observers. He also promoted synodality prior to Francis announcing the synod on synodality in 2020.

"When Prevost arrived, the first thing he did was speak of the Second Vatican Council," said José Luis Estela, co-leader of the diocesan commission on marriage and family in Chiclayo.

"This is what we've been talking about here in Chiclayo, the church in terms of synodality: Walking together, we all have a shared mission, we are all brothers and sisters — believers or nonbelievers — we all walk toward the same goal," said Estela, who is also the Jesuits' representative in Chiclayo. "Prevost spoke of all these themes of synodality in terms of: We are a church, in a family."

Leo's new approach to governance wasn't well received by all, especially some priests close to previous Opus Dei governance of the diocese, according to Piscoya.

"Msgr. Roberto's first three years were very hard," Piscoya said. He recalled Leo telling him, "The greatest challenge lies in unity.' … Because he found a very fragmented church."

He recalled Leo telling him, "The war is won battle after battle. And today I'm not going to win the war. We're going to win one battle and then another.' " Piscayo continued, "That was significant for me because having trusted a layman who assumed the pastoral leadership of a rather conservative church, we had to win battle after battle."

For his part, Llanos said Leo developed a positive relationship with Opus Dei and worked closely with its priests. He celebrated an annual Mass for the feast of Opus Dei founder St. Josemaría Escriva, whose portrait is displayed in the Chiclayo cathedral.

"When Robert Prévost became bishop, anyone might think that ... the first thing he would do was shake things up. That is, replace a lot of people. But that didn't happen," Llanos said.

"(The) ability to be a pope-bridge, a pope able to equilibrate" with others "is what most probably made him win the election as fast as he did."

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