Opinion
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Pope Leo XIV greets visitors during his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican June 4, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Sunday will mark one month since the election of Pope Leo XIV. Many people have looked at discrete decisions, like his choice of clothing, as tea leaves about his pontificate, whether they are or not.

For example, there is much speculation about whether the new pope will live in the Vatican guesthouse where Pope Francis lived, or if he will return to the apostolic palace. Would moving back to the palace be a repudiation of Francis? A sign that Leo intends a more regal papacy? No. The issue about living in the apostolic palace was raised during the pre-conclave general congregations not because of its symbolism but because of its cost: Paying for security in two locations has become prohibitively expensive.

In seeking to discern any direction in the new papacy, it is smarter to highlight things he has said in this first month that offer an inkling as to how he views his ministry.

His first Sunday as pope, four days after his election, Leo celebrated Mass with a few Augustinian brothers in the crypt of St. Peter's. Fr. Tony Pizzo, provincial of the Midwest Augustinians, was in Rome to celebrate the anniversary of his ordination. While they were all vesting before the Mass, Leo congratulated Pizzo on his anniversary and asked him if he would like to preside at the Mass. Pizzo said, "I could not believe he asked me that. And I looked at him, and I said, 'Nooooo.' "

Leo presided, and in his homily said:

> How important it is to listen! Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice". And I think it is important for all of us to learn how to listen more, to enter into dialogue. First and foremost, with the Lord: always listen to the Word of God. Then also listen to others, to know how to build bridges, to know how to listen without judging, not closing the doors thinking that we have all the truth and no one else can tell us anything. It is very important to listen to the voice of the Lord, to listen to it, in this dialogue, and to see where the Lord is calling us towards.

It is not difficult to imagine Pope Francis saying these words. They point to synodality and, critically, that we listen to each other to better listen to the Holy Spirit. The critics of synodality who complain it is precisely the kind of inward-looking experience Francis claimed to shun always leave out the part about listening to the Holy Spirit. Also worth noting is the absence of listening in various social media ministries such as Bishop Robert Barron's Word on Fire. There, the answers are prepackaged and ready to be shared with the docile audience. That is not Leo's approach.

In the days of his first week as pope, Leo met with a variety of groups, including the media and members of a charitable foundation. Speaking to the diplomatic corps, he focused his message on three words: peace, justice and truth. I found his remarks about truth especially blunt and penetrating. "The third word is *truth*. Truly peaceful relationships cannot be built, also within the international community, apart from truth," the pope 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."

Leo's insight to the damaging way virtual communication entails an altered sense of perception, and his negative comment about "ambiguous and ambivalent" speech suggest that he sees the need to speak clearly, if only to answer those critics of Francis who accused the late pope of spreading confusion. Francis was not "confusing"; he understood the messiness of human life and spoke to it. There is no reason to think Leo will be different, but he might try harder to disarm such criticisms.

The following Sunday, at the Mass inaugurating his ministry as bishop of Rome, Leo said, "Brothers and sisters, I would like that our first great desire be for *a united Church, a sign of unity and communion, which becomes a leaven for a reconciled world*" (emphasis in original). In a fine piece before the conclave, The New York Times' Jason Horowitz explained how some conservatives were invoking "unity" in such a way as to apply the brakes to ecclesial reform. Cardinal Michael Czerny complained, "It sounds really good," but "it means reversal." He called for a focus on "diversity."

I expect that Leo will embrace "unity" in his talks but also will, at some point, contrast it with uniformity. In his 2005 speech to the Curia, Pope Benedict XVI

insisted that a "hermeneutic of reform" be applied to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, a hermeneutic which entails elements of both continuity and discontinuity. Similarly, for Leo, unity will involve elements of diversity too.

Of all the talks Pope Leo has given in the last month, my favorite was his address to the seminar "Evangelizing with the Families of Today and Tomorrow: Ecclesiological and Pastoral Challenges," sponsored by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life. He identified two of the problems that I have long been convinced are among the principal challenges the church faces. Leo said:

> Sadly, in the face of this need, an increasingly widespread "privatization" of faith often prevents these brothers and sisters from knowing the richness and gifts of the Church, a place of grace, fraternity, and love.
>
> As a result, despite their healthy and holy desires, while they sincerely seek ways to climb the exciting upward paths to life and abundant joy, many end up relying on false footholds that are unable to support the weight of their deepest needs and cause them to slip back down, away from God, shipwrecked on a sea of worldly concerns.

The privatization of faith has been imposed by the facts of pluralism and secularization. The simplistic invocation of fears about a return to the "wars of religion" has made the privatization of religion seem necessary for civil peace, and masked its inadequacy as a solution. A faith, at least the Christian faith, cannot be privatized; It makes claims on the entirety of one's life and proposes meaningful ideas and values about the structuring of society. I hope Leo will articulate a sustained critique of the privatization of faith.

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In that same address, Leo also spoke about another, related theme that is equally important for contemporary religion, the priority of grace. He said:

> Faith is primarily a response to God's love, and the greatest mistake we can make as Christians is, in the words of Saint Augustine, "to claim that Christ's grace consists in his example and not in the gift of his person"

> [Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum, II, 146]. How often, even in the not too distant past, have we forgotten this truth and presented Christian life mostly as a set of rules to be kept, replacing the marvelous experience of encountering Jesus – God who gives himself to us – with a moralistic, burdensome and unappealing religion that, in some ways, is impossible to live in concrete daily life.

Some people propose liberal rules and others propose conservative rules, but the Christian faith is not about the rules first and foremost. Ethics is downstream from Christianity's dogmatic claims and, critically, faith is a gift, not a human product. God bestows faith on us.

This has been lost in America where the fact of religious pluralism in the early Republic led to an understanding of religion as voluntaristic, you get to choose your religion. In terms of civil law, this is necessarily true, but in terms of understanding the inner dynamics of faith, God chooses us, we do not choose him. Most of the theological abominations in our day flow from this misunderstanding or are, at least, fortified by it. If we do not start with grace, everything is off-balance or worse.

This leads to what I believe will be the most interesting fact of this pontificate: Just as we all learned a lot about St. Ignatius under Pope Francis, we are about to learn a lot about St. Augustine under Pope Leo. There is a quote from the one, great Western church father in almost every speech Leo has given.

And, Augustine still has much to teach us.

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