Opinion
NCR Voices
Pope Leo with Swiss Guard

Pope Leo XIV greets a member of the Swiss Guard during a meeting with officials and employees of the Roman Curia, Vatican City State and the Diocese of Rome in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican May 24. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Do popes get honeymoons? Not the traditional kind, obviously. But do they get the political kind?

Friday, I looked at some of Pope Leo XIV's comments in his first month in office and what they tell us about his leadership. Today, we look ahead to some looming decisions that, whether Leo likes it or not, will shape his papacy in profound ways and indicate what we can expect from his tenure.

The pope wears many hats. He is first and foremost the universal pastor and so his manner of preaching the Gospel and leading the flock filters down to the bishops and through them to the clergy and the laity. Indeed, in the age of social media and papal globe-trotting, there is less filtering than there used to be, and more immediate role modeling by a pope. Already, we see Leo kissing babies, which

wasn't part of his job description as a cardinal-prefect at the Dicastery for Bishop.

He is also the CEO of the Vatican curia. Leo's predecessor, Pope Francis, delivered a scathing critique of the curia in his early years and mostly worked around them, relying on his own network of sources for information. Pope John Paul II also largely worked around the curia. What will Leo do?

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The new pope addressed the curia on May 24 and his tone was collaborative and encouraging. "Popes pass, the Curia remains.... The Curia is the institution that preserves and transmits the historical memory of a Church, of the ministry of its bishops. This is very important," Leo said.

He has not made very many appointments to the curia. His first major appointment was that of Sr. Tiziana Merletti to be secretary of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Three of the four bishops Leo has named in the U.S. are immigrants: Bishop Michael Pham of San Diego, born in Vietnam, auxiliary Bishop-elect Pedro Chau of Newark, born in Nicaragua, and Bishop-designate Simon Engurait, of Houma-Thibodaux, Louisiana, born in Uganda. All these appointments were likely in the works before Francis died.

The biggest appointment Leo cannot avoid is choosing someone to succeed him at the Dicastery for Bishops. That is a large and consequential post and Leo must fill it with someone he both trusts completely and someone who can sustain the enormous workload. There are some jobs in the Vatican that you can fake, but prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops is not one of them.

Other key Vatican officials have reached the mandatory retirement age, but Francis kept them on because of the good work they did. One, in particular, could prove vital to Pope Leo: Cardinal Kevin Farrell is 77, two years past the retirement age. Farrell successfully combined two offices into the Dicastery for Family, Laity and Life, and has served as prefect since 2015. Pope Francis also tapped Farrell to lead the ominously titled "Commission for Confidential Matters" in 2020. Farrell has been

trying to get a handle on the Vatican's finances. It is vital that Leo retain Farrell in this role. The Vatican's budget is deeply in the red and the finances are often a source of scandal. I can think of no better man than Farrell to deal with both the corruption and the need to balance the budget.

Gaining control of the finances is an enormous task and it is a large part of the reform of the Curia that has been fitfully attempted since Vatican II. The efforts to internationalize the Curia have not worked: Officials come for a few years and then leave, but the Italians stay. Until the Italians are term-limited effectively, nothing will change.

I asked a cardinal about Pope Francis' attempt to reform the Curia, contained in his 2022 apostolic constitution *Predicate Evangelium*. "They are words on a page until they are implemented," he said, a whiff of wistfulness in his voice.

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Finally, there is the project of synodality. How can we overcome the polarization that afflicts the church in the United States unless we learn to listen to and eventually to love one another? As we have heard in Jesus' high priestly prayer, proclaimed in the Gospels of recent weeks, the love that we share is rooted in the love the Father and the Son share. Clearly, something got lost in translation. I certainly hope no one mistakes the nastiness of our current divisions for the love that exists within the Trinity!

The key is not merely that listening gets us past the caricatures we place on other people. It is that we are attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit in listening to one another. And, as Leo has made clear in several talks, the Augustinian insistence on the priority of grace is the only way we get past our human divisions.

Synodality also invites co-responsibility and the diminishment of clericalism. This will require lay people to rise to the occasion, and recognize the burden such responsibility entails, that co-responsibility is not a means for obtaining particular outcomes other than strengthening the church in faith, hope and charity. If that strengthening happens, it is enough. If it is not enough for some people, they expose themselves as wolves in sheep's clothing, people who do not accept responsibility for the church on ecclesial terms but who seek to apply political pressure to achieve

their own ends. There is a clericalism found among the laity too!

Pope Leo is a member of a religious order, and so synodal decision making is second nature. It remains to be seen how his Augustinianism influences his decision-making in ways that are similar to, or different from, Francis' Ignatian influences.

Those are the things I think we will all be focusing on in the coming months as we learn more about Leo and, indeed, as Leo himself adjusts to his new, and terrifying, role. That said, the episode with Fr. Tony Pizzo we discussed Friday gives enormous hope. A pope who can, within a few days of his election, ask a priest celebrating his anniversary of ordination if he would like to preside at Mass at the tomb of St. Peter, that is a pope whose humanity remains vivid to himself. The props of the office can wear a person down, the bowing and the scraping, the adulation of the crowds in the square and the priceless art in the office. Leo seems remarkably unflustered by his election, aware of the enormity of the change that has happened to him, but not the least overwhelmed by it.