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Priests wait for the start of an ordination Mass celebrated by Pope Leo XIV in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican as part of the Jubilee of Priests, Friday, June 27, 2025. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Pope Leo XIV doubled down on Friday on his appeal for unity in the polarized Catholic Church, urging priests to act in communion with their superiors and be models of reconciliation in a world driven by conflicts and divisions.

Leo appealed for unity in a triptych of messages to priests who are celebrating a special Holy Year week in Rome dedicated to clergy. He hosted a special meeting on Thursday afternoon, celebrated an ordination Mass on Friday morning and also delivered a written message to priests around the world.

During the Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, Leo ordained 32 new priests and recalled his appeal for unity during his installation Mass right after his May 8 election.

"Today, I share this desire once more with all of you," he said. He quoted St. Augustine — the inspiration of his Augustinian religious order — in repeating the words he said on the night of his election: "For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian."

During the meetings that preceded the conclave that elected the first American pope in history, cardinals made clear their hope that the next pontiff would heal some of the divisions within the church that deepened during the late Pope Francis' radical 12-year pontificate.

Francis' progressive social justice priorities, his informal style, liturgical looseness and disdain for the capitalist economic system often alienated conservatives, particularly in Leo's native United States, who begged for a new pope who could pacify divisions.

Leo's consistent reference to unity in the church suggests he has heard those appeals and is working to respond.

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In a message to priests around the world Friday, Leo offered encouragement in his appeal for unity, not a browbeating as Francis often gave priests.

"In a world marked by growing tensions, even within families and ecclesial communities, priests are called to promote reconciliation and foster communion," Leo said. He added that priests should not be afraid of their own weaknesses. "The Lord does not look for perfect priests, but for humble hearts that are open to conversion and prepared to love others as he himself loved us," he said.

He gave a similar message Thursday to thousands of priests who gathered in a Vatican-area auditorium for a Jubilee rally that ended with Leo giving English-language shoutouts to priests from various parts of the world, including his native Chicago.

In the encounter, Leo acknowledged the "crisis" in priestly vocations, which have been falling consistently in traditionally Christian parts of the world for years even as the overall global Catholic population grows.

According to Vatican statistics, there were 407,730 priests globally at the end of 2022, down 142 from the previous year. Europe saw the greatest decline, losing 2,745 priests — a figure that was only compensated for globally by the addition of 1,676 priests in Africa and 1,160 in Asia.

"Thank you for who you are, and remind everyone that it's beautiful to be a priest," he said. "We aren't perfect, but we are friends of Christ … and that's enough."

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