Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Leo XIV waves after arriving in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, July 6, 2025. (OSV News/CPP/Alessia Giuliani)



by James Carville

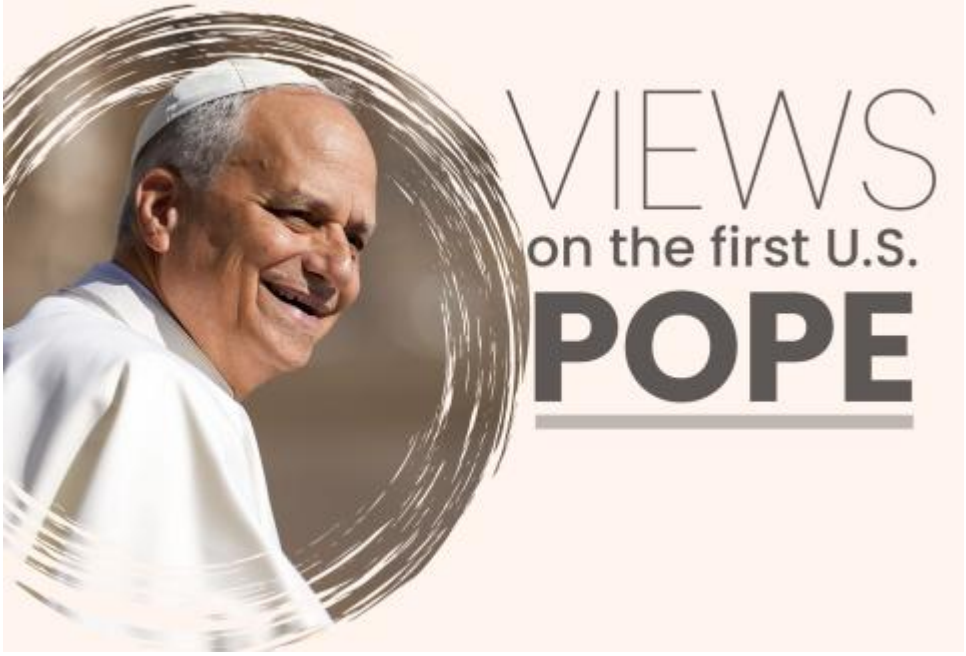
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As an 80-year-old cradle Catholic, I've had a long, tortuous, winding and complicated relationship with the Catholic Church.

I started as a pre-Vatican II altar boy. As a youth, I looked at the church with awe and saw its grandeur and tradition as something with which I wanted to identify. I was so serious about the Catholic Church that I prayed the Nine First Fridays Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a practice where one must attend Mass and receive Communion on the first Fridays of nine consecutive months.

As happens to so many of us, as I grew up, my faith began to waver. I questioned many things about the church and my faith. That questioning eventually turned into anger, disgust and betrayal. They were un-Christian, uncharitable thoughts.

This is one in a series of essays about the election of the first pope born in the United States. NCR asked notable Catholics and Americans from various perspectives within the faith community to write about their hopes, dreams and expectations for Pope Leo XIV.

I watched the confused and pitiful papacy of Pope Paul VI. Then I watched the somewhat better, but hardly perfect, papacy of Pope John Paul II. I came to understand that the pope of my childhood, Pope Pius XII, was not a particularly good guy. I had to wrestle with this, and then, like so many Catholics, I wrestled with the abuse and scandal, and the magnitude of the cover-up. (I must say I was never even close to being abused.) Then there was the inadequate and confused papacy of Pope Benedict XVI, who should have been the head of a theology department at a Catholic university, but instead was made pope.

At the time Pope Francis was elected, I had traveled to Argentina many times as an international political consultant. I had heard about him, knowing of his work as a cardinal. I saw him riding a municipal bus once when he was Cardinal Jorge Bergoligo, of the Buenos Aires Archdiocese. He was a warm, charitable pope who genuinely wanted the Catholic Church to emulate Jesus Christ and not adhere to antiquated teachings rooted in old prejudices. He was enlightened.

The election of Pope Leo XIV brought an immense amount of joy to my heart. It seems that the College of Cardinals decided to continue in somewhat the same direction Francis laid out for the church.

Leo's background is something to behold. I love that he is from Chicago and was educated in the United States. I love that he is a baseball fan. And given my own Louisiana Catholic roots, I particularly love that part of his family was Creole, from New Orleans.

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He learned most of his clerical responsibilities as bishop of the Chiclayo Diocese in Peru and was well-positioned to be elected by the magnificent politics of Francis. It was a joy, as someone who has spent their life working in politics, to see that politics can actually advance a worthy cause.

In the words of St. Pope John XXIII, I pray that Leo will continue to dispense of the "medicine of mercy" and adhere to Matthew 7:1-3 as a center of church teaching:

> Stop judging, that you may not be judged. For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you. Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye?

I have, after 80 years, felt something that I never thought I would in this century as a Roman Catholic. I feel optimistic. I feel renewed. I feel bright about the future of the Catholic Church. As I face my journey home, I'm delighted that I can walk hand in hand with the Catholic Church for the rest of my life. I just hope and pray that the church continues in this same enlightened direction.

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