Culture
Book Reviews



Pope Leo XIV gives a thumbs-up as he rides the popemobile around St. Peter's Square at the Vatican before his weekly general audience Aug. 6, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Kat Armas

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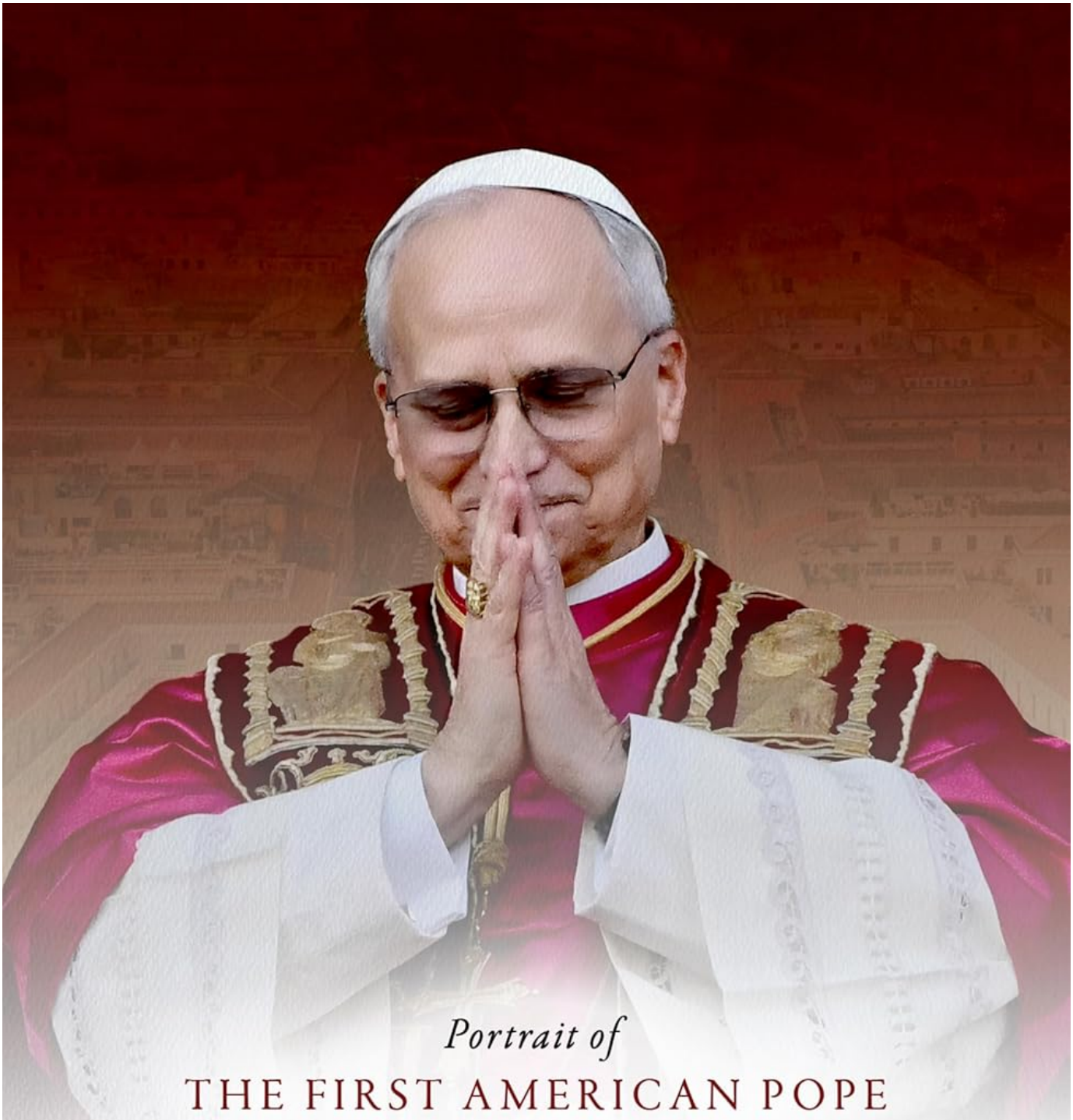
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August 10, 2025

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I consider myself something of an insider-outsider in Catholicism, if such a thing exists. I was raised within the stained-glass walls of St. Dominic Parish in Miami's Little Havana neighborhood, a sanctuary for newly arrived Cuban refugees like my family. The parish itself was young, founded just three years before the Cuban Revolution would send waves of exiles across the Florida Straits. Those early years were marked by upheaval: Black Americans were in the throes of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War raged on and the Second Vatican Council had just thrown open the church's windows to the modern world.

St. Dominic's felt all of it. The parish was reshaped in those decades, not just by the influx of Cuban families but by the Dominican friars of the Southern Province who took over from the Spanish Dominicans in 1980. That's the context that formed me. It's where I first encountered Christ — in the sacraments, in the poetry of liturgy and in the stubborn faith of exiled people. And while I no longer dwell in those exact spaces, I carry them with me. Which is why I'm grateful for the two latest accounts of the new pontiff: Matthew Bunson's *Portrait of the First American Pope: Leo XIV* and Christopher White's *Pope Leo XIV: Inside the Conclave, Dawn of a New Papacy*.



*Portrait of*

THE FIRST AMERICAN POPE

# LEO XIV

MATTHEW BUNSON

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Portrait of the First American Pope: Leo XIV
Matthew Bunson
160 pages; Sophia Institute Press
$17.95

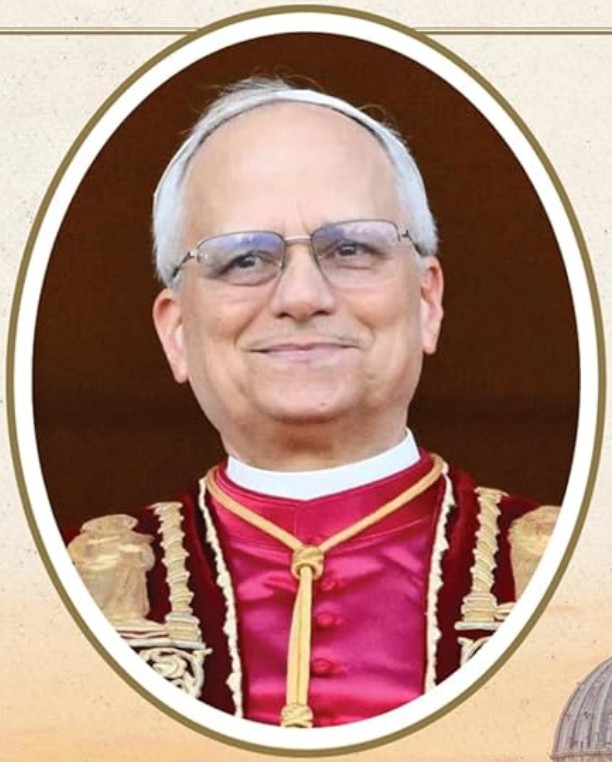
Though my connection to St. Dominic's and Miami's Cuban community has shifted, I still know, deep in my bones, the power of place; the scent of the pews, the texture of stained glass, the waters of a baptismal font that mark you forever. Bunson understands this too. In *Portrait* he roots Pope Leo — Robert Prevost — not merely in his office, but in the sacred geography that shaped him: Chicago's South Side, at St. Mary of the Assumption Parish.

*Portrait* reads like both a spiritual and institutional biography, tracing Leo XIV's journey from priest to papal office. It's an accessible yet reverent account, one that focuses not just on Prevost's résumé, but on how deeply two forces have shaped the new pontiff: his unwavering love for Jesus, and his formation within the Augustinian tradition.

CHRISTOPHER WHITE

# POPE LEO XIV

INSIDE THE CONCLAVE AND THE DAWN OF A NEW PAPACY





Pope Leo XIV: Inside the Conclave, Dawn of a New Papacy
Christopher White
168 pages; Loyola Press
$19.99

Christopher White, on the other hand, offers more of a journalistic lens. His is an insider's account of the moments leading up to the conclave, the Vatican dynamics at play and the significance of Prevost's election for both the Roman Curia and the global Catholic Church. The context White provides is rich and illuminating, especially for readers seeking to understand the landscape Leo XIV inherits.

Bunson makes a compelling point in describing Leo XIV as the first completely American pope; not in the narrow, nationalistic sense of "American" as synonymous with the United States, but as a man shaped by both American continents. Though he began his work in Peru as a missionary, Bunson notes, "he became Peruvian (58)." As someone with Latin American roots, I found this framing refreshing. Too often, calling the U.S. simply "America" reflects a U.S.-centric worldview, one that flattens a diverse hemisphere into a single dominant narrative.

If only Bunson had sustained that same awareness throughout the book. Despite his nuanced portrayal of Leo's bicontinental identity, he repeatedly refers to European colonizers in Latin America simply as "missionaries," highlighting what good he believes they did while obscuring and overlooking the violent entanglements of evangelism and empire.



(Brittany Buongiorno)

While Bunson reflects on place, church history and formation — anchoring Leo XIV within the broader arc of Catholic tradition — White offers a sense of immediacy and urgency. His narrative moves with the pace of breaking news, focusing on shifting policies, ecclesial alliances, and the political stakes and global tensions surrounding this historic election. Nearly half the book is devoted to Pope Francis, and while this

context helps frame what Leo inherits, it offers relatively little on Leo's life before his election. Still, White raises critical questions for a post-Francis church, chief among them: What will the relationship between the United States and the Vatican look like now that the first pope from the U.S. has been elected, especially at a moment when the American presidency is once again reshaping the global order? (140)

> The question isn't whether a pope is political, but how — and for whom — his politics proclaim good news.
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As someone shaped by the immigrant church yet often positioned on its periphery, I approached both of these books with a blend of hope and caution. The election of Leo XIV is historic; not only because he is the first American pope, but because of what "American" signifies at this moment in history. Does it suggest pastoral pragmatism or the entrenchment of nationalism? Is it a voice rising from the margins or a consolidation of Vatican power through a Western gaze?

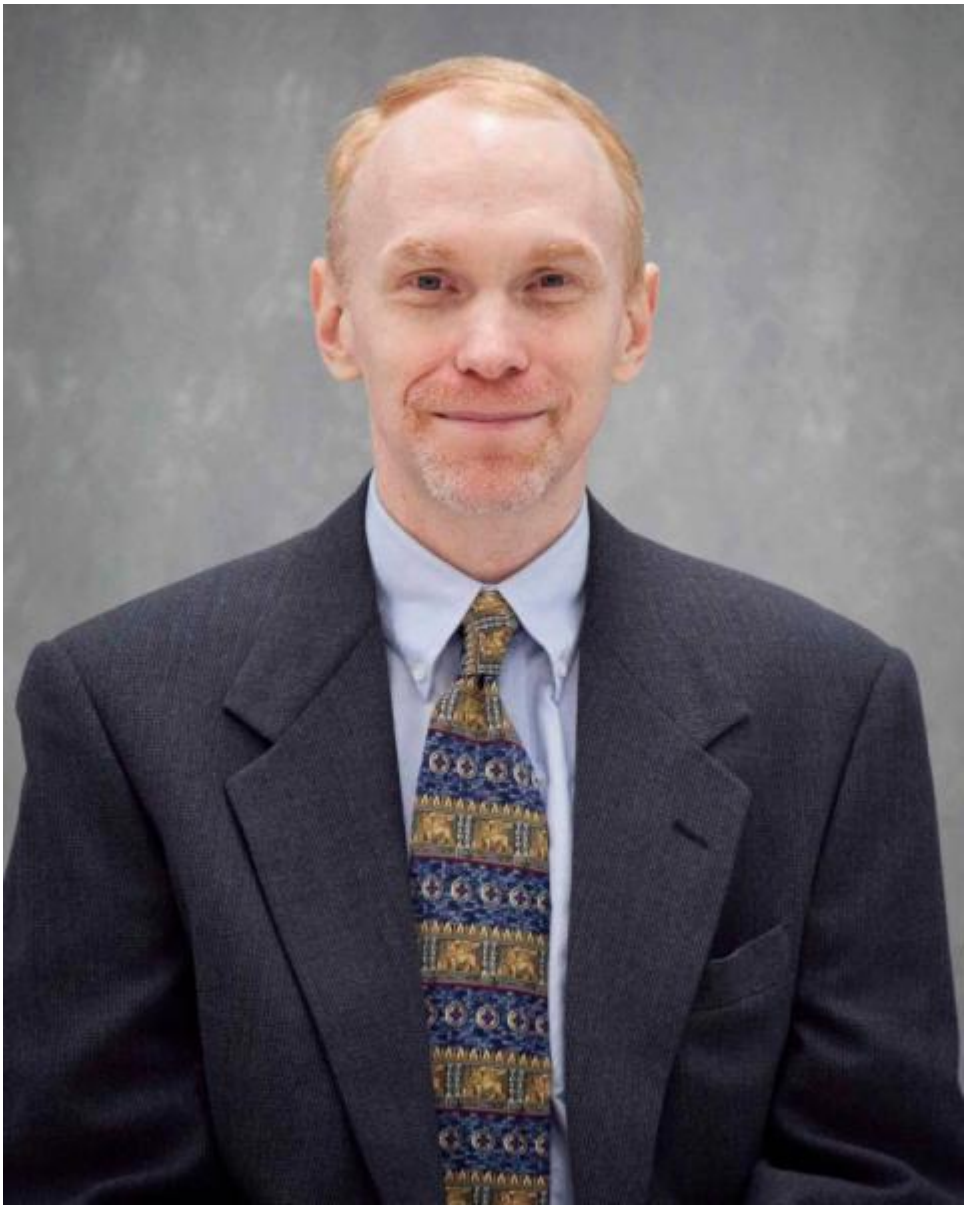
Bunson wrestles with the symbolism of American ascendancy. He questions whether the election of an American pope signals the waning of American superpower. Still, he frames Leo's papacy as a response to global crises. "The world needs a renewal of Catholic witness," Bunson writes. "And the Church needs a renewal of her social teaching (9)." According to him, the threats to this witness include the onslaught of mass media, secularism, artificial intelligence and what he names as a growing "hatred of religious beliefs (118)."



With a U.S. flag in the background, Pope Leo XIV waves to the crowd from the popemobile as he rides around St. Peter's Square at the Vatican before his weekly general audience Aug. 6, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

While these are real forces, I couldn't help but wonder: Are they the only ones? What of the escalating nationalism, the surge of white Christian supremacy, the dehumanization of migrants and the growing chasm between rich and poor? These, too, play a role in the church's credibility and witness. And as White makes clear in his broader context-setting, these are precisely the forces Pope Francis sought to confront head-on.

Bunson is right to critique the flattening of Leo XIV's identity into a single headline or viral post, many of which began circulating within hours of his election. For some, the new pope quickly became a symbol of political miscalculation, another figure caught in the crossfire of the American culture wars. Bunson pushes back against that reduction, offering instead a portrait of a man deeply formed by a love for Christ through his Augustinian roots that led him to serve the poor in Peru long before he entered the corridors of ecclesial power.



Matthew Bunson, pictured in this undated photo, is vice president and editorial director of EWTN News. (CNS/courtesy Our Sunday Visitor)

"He played pope as a kid," Bunson writes, capturing something of Leo's early and enduring spiritual imagination. But in his effort to center Leo's humanity and spiritual depth, Bunson risks overlooking a vital truth: to love Jesus in public is, inevitably, to be political. Not in the narrow, partisan sense, but in the way that challenges power, sides with the vulnerable and refuses to conform to the binary logic of left and right. To serve the poor is to disrupt the status quo. To embody a Gospel-rooted ethic is not to transcend politics, but to engage it differently. After all, Jesus himself was a profoundly political figure: disrupting empire, overturning tables

and inaugurating a new order rooted in justice, mercy and love.

This is where White's account offers a crucial counterbalance. He writes from within the context of a church still grappling with the legacy of a leader who championed migrants, critiqued capitalism and stood firm in the face of fierce right-wing backlash. White doesn't cast Leo as a culture warrior, but he does take seriously the political weight of electing an American pope at a time of global unrest and national division. His narrative reminds us that the papacy does not — and cannot — exist outside of political realities.

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Leo XIV may not be a provocateur, but his formation in Latin America, ministry among the poor and refusal to conform to ideological camps amount to a quiet resistance. His politics are not absent, they're incarnational. Rooted in compassion, they quietly challenge the empires of our day. Bunson is right to center Leo's love for Jesus. But in a world saturated with dehumanizing -isms — racism, nationalism, clericalism — such love, if lived faithfully, will always be disruptive. It was for Jesus. It was for Francis. And as White suggests, it may be for Leo XIV as well. The question isn't whether a pope is political, but how — and for whom — his politics proclaim good news.

At St. Dominic's, I was taught to pray for the pope, though he always felt impossibly distant. But reading these two books, I found myself both concerned with papal authority and also captivated by the humanity beneath it; the parish roots, the holy restlessness, the way faith is shaped not just by doctrine, but by geography, migration and memory.



Pope Leo XIV hugs a pilgrim from Argentina after his weekly general audience Aug. 6, 2025, in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Both Bunson and White agree on this: Leo XIV is a humble man who is able to listen deeply and lead with quiet strength. He carries within him the rare and urgent potential to be a bridge-builder. And perhaps that's exactly what we need: A pope willing to build bridges in a time when the waters between us feel wider than ever.

Whether Leo XIV will carry forth his predecessor's vision of a synodal church, as White suggests, or lead a renewal of Catholic witness and social teachings, as Bunson hopes, remains to be seen. But for those of us watching from the pews and the margins, these portraits offer something rare: a glimpse into the man now entrusted with the weight of Peter's keys.