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Pope Leo XIV's brother John Prevost, right, and his friend Augustinian Fr. Ray Flores, look at a photo of what Prevost guessed was the pope's ninth birthday cake and ice cream celebration. (OSV News/Simone Orendain)

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Pope Leo XIV turns 70 on Sept. 14 and some of his closest friends in the Chicago-area will mark the day with him in mind, quietly.

But at one point in his priesthood, quiet was not the word to describe his birthday celebrations, for which he had to block off multiple days.

"The day itself we'd have in the (religious) community, but we'd have a weeklong celebration because he had to have a birthday in each of these zones, everybody wanted to do his birthday, because they had great appreciation of him," said Augustinian Fr. John Lydon, who lived with then Fr. Robert Prevost for about 10 years at their order's formation house in the coastal city of Trujillo, Peru.

Residents of these "zones" or little villages-slash-neighborhoods made up the parish, according to Lydon, now the formator at the Augustinians' North American formation house in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood.

He said the parish was made up of six zones in southern Trujillo and five of them hosted one night each of partying during his good friend's birthday week, "because he was the pastor of our parish … and because a good number of the zones are in the very poorer areas of Trujillo, and he treated the poor with a lot of dignity, which wasn't common in the '90s."

Lydon said Peruvian birthday celebrations "are very big, more than in America." He described to OSV News that families would host a dinner, serve homemade birthday cake (usually white cake with chocolate icing) and then have lots of dancing after the meal. He said a typical Peruvian celebration is an all-night dance party that usually gets started at 10 p.m. and lasts until 6 a.m. the next morning.

"But we didn't do that (stay up too late)," having the earlier schedules that priests do, while the parishioners continued through the early morning. But the big question

about these parties is: Did the Augustinians dance? Did the future Pope Leo dance?

"Oh, yeah, definitely," exclaimed Lydon. "Everyone danced!"

There were no live bands. Once in a while someone had a guitar, but that was more for serenading Leo with "Happy Birthday to you," in Spanish, which is what they mostly did in the sixth zone, which includes the seminary, at a lunch party during the day.

The night party music was "the moda (modern)," popular contemporary dance music blaring out of a boom box, according to Lydon, retired president of Catholic University of Trujillo. He said they danced whatever were the popular dance moves of the '90's, usually from Brazil and the birthday decorations included lots of balloons that people would pop at the end of a song, to punctuate the festivities with a canon-like salute for the pastor.

Far from the "big style" partying of Peru, a country of which the first American pope also holds citizenship, Lydon said for his close friend's 70th birthday this year, he would remember him in a prayer and reflection video called "5 minutes with God." He sends this out twice weekly to Villanova University students during the school year. He also plans to offer a Mass for the pope that day.

Going further back, to Leo's childhood, birthday celebrations were far more subdued, at least according to his brother John Prevost of New Lenox, a southwest Chicago suburb.

Prevost, 71, said from what he remembered, "it was just regular, I assume, what everyone else did. You get a cake, you open a present, and then you went to bed."

He held up a black and white photo, with the year '64 stamped on it, that he said he was almost certain was Leo's ninth birthday.

The family sat at the dinner table with his brother the pope, smiling broadly at the camera, while their mother, her back to the camera, cut a birthday cake and himself also smiling while eating ice cream between two aunts eating ice cream. Their father, who is not pictured, presumably sat at the head. He said the shot was likely taken by the two boys' oldest brother, Louis, since there was one unoccupied chair.

Prevost told OSV News the cake was certain to be angel food cake, but "it didn't (even) have to be his birthday. That was his favorite: angel food cake. To this day,

even."

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Even the choice of cake was angelic for the boy whom neighbors and teachers said would be pope one day and who played priest in the family's south suburban Chicago home from a very young age. (Prevost laughed when this was pointed out to him and said he had only just realized it).

When Prevost's friend Augustinian Fr. Ray Flores, who sat in on the interview with OSV News, remarked that the pope's birthday, Sept. 14 is the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Prevost said, "See? Holiness again," and laughed.

He also said, since Robert left home at 13 to enter the Augustinians' minor seminary in Holland, Michigan, keeping regular contact with his brother has been the priority, whether their routine daily call falls on his birthday, or not. Even on birthdays, Prevost said, because his family does not know his schedule, they have to wait for a video call from him.

From the minor seminary, Leo went on to college at the Augustinian Villanova University in Philadelphia graduating in 1977, finished seminary at Catholic Theological Union in Hyde Park, went on to Rome for school and ordination to the priesthood (both in 1982). He earned a licentiate, then a doctorate, in canon law (1984, 1987), both at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas. He was first sent to Peru to work in the mission of Chulucanas, in Piura, Peru, (1985-1986), did more mission work in Peru, based in the Archdiocese of Turjillo (1988-1999), then traveled the world as prior general of the whole order (2001-2013).

He went back to Peru (2014-2023) this time as bishop of Chiclayo Diocese, simultaneously holding Vatican positions, then was recalled to Rome to be elevated to cardinal (2023) and prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, until his election to the papacy May 8.

About a week before Leo's upcoming birthday, his brother John Prevost and a close friend, a next door playmate who was like a sister to the boys growing up, along with her family, plan to go to Aurelio's Pizza in the nearby suburb of Homewood. That was where then-Cardinal Prevost stopped in for pizza months before he became pope.

Once he was elected pope, Aurelio's started serving a "Pope-roni" pizza.

"They have this big sign 'the Pope sat here.' We will go and sit there (at the table) and have a sign that says, 'Happy Birthday,'" said John. And they plan to send that photo to Leo on his birthday.

John said his brother turning 70 is "a big milestone" among many in this past year.

He said a Church Pop Facebook post captured this well, during Pope Leo's visit with young people at the Jubilee of Youth in early August.

"He was walking up those stairs... for that (Jubilee) week with the kids, and there was that caption: Everyone should be able to climb stairs like Pope Leo (at age 69)," he said. "See? So it's (70 is) just another step. And he'll take it."

This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** and **Looking for Leo in History** feature series.