Opinion
Guest Voices
A pillar is visible in front of St. Thomas of Villanova Church on the campus of Villanova Univer

A pillar is visible in front of St. Thomas of Villanova Church at Villanova. (OSV News /CNS file, Chaz Muth)



by Ava Petrosky

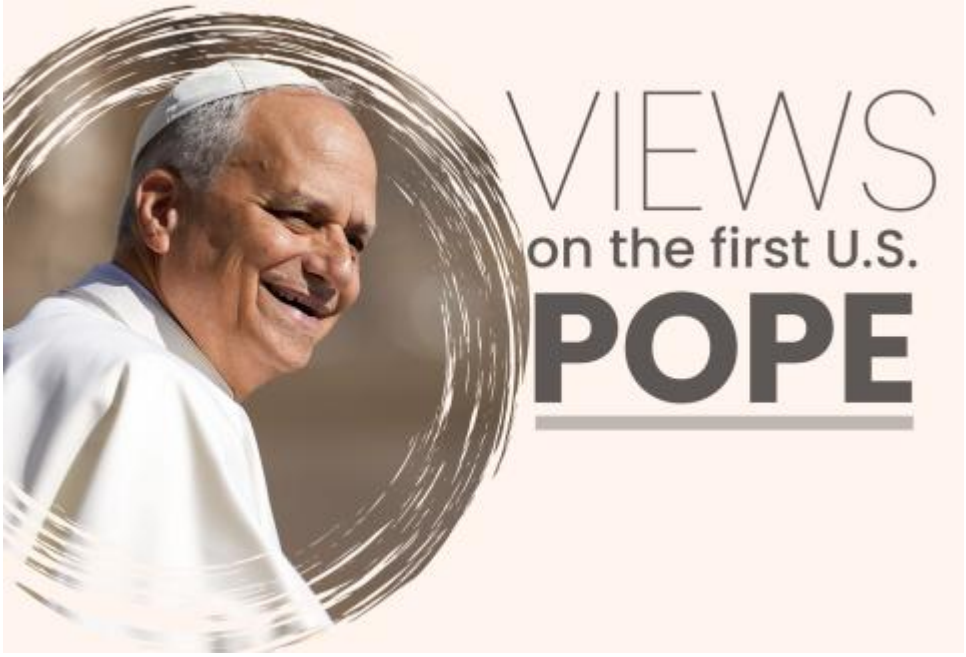
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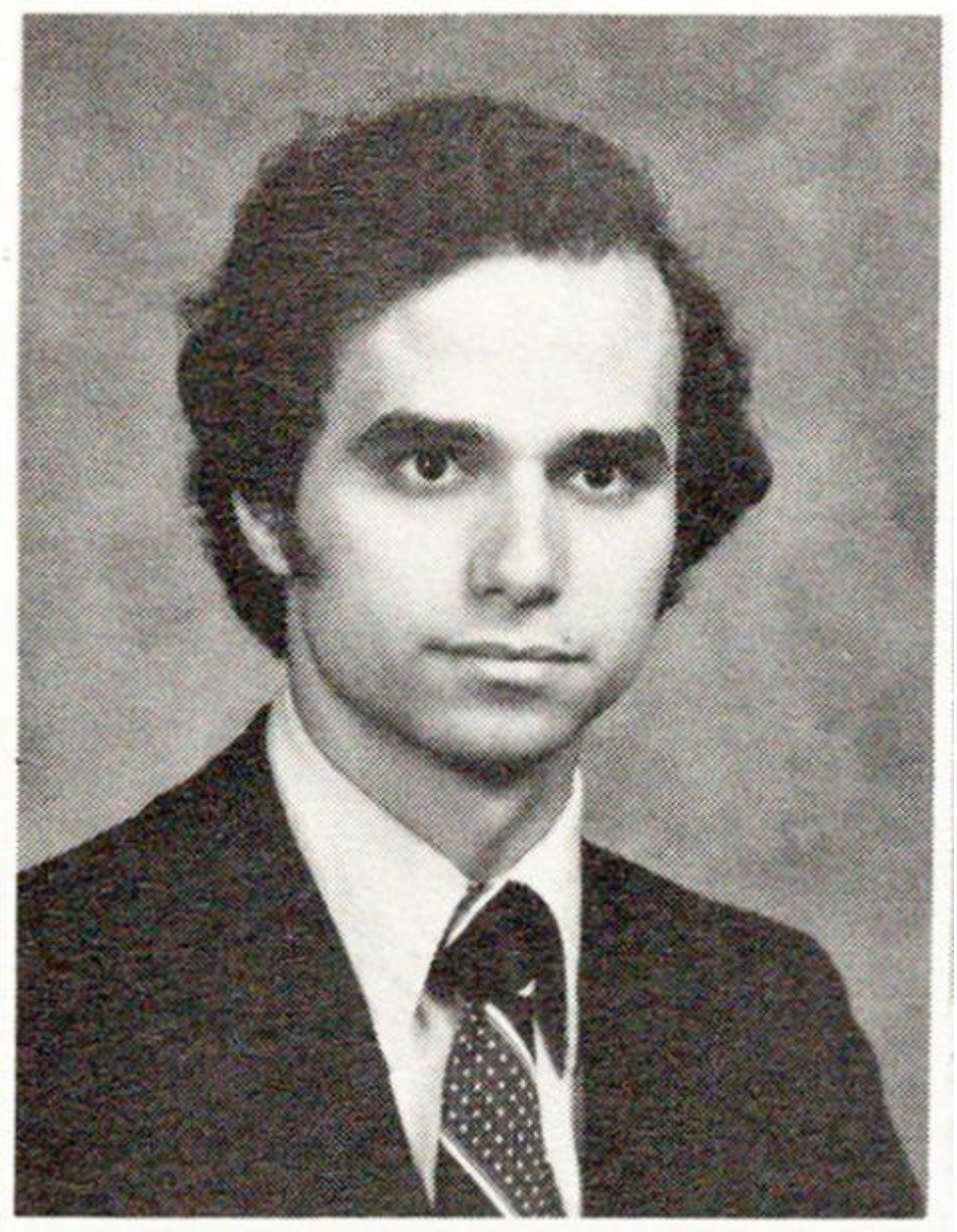
In October 2024, Madigan Reens, a Villanova University undergraduate, class of '26, traveled with a group of about 20 Villanovans to partake in the Synod on Synodality. Established by Pope Francis, the synod is an opportunity for laypeople, including women, to express their concerns and ideas for the future of the Catholic Church.

On that trip, Reens' theology class met in the crypt of St. Peter's Basilica to celebrate a private Mass with Cardinal Robert Prevost, a Villanova alumnus.

In a white sweater and jeans, she clasped around her neck the silver rosary necklace she purchased at St. Paul's Basilica the day prior. Later that week, the piece of jewelry would be blessed by Pope Francis during his General Audience.

Seven months later, on the morning of May 8, Reens woke up with anticipatory relief that her junior year was almost complete: After her final accounting exam, her hardest final yet, summer vacation would begin. After studying all morning, she walked into the classroom with the silver rosary necklace draped around her neck.

Mid-exam, Reens' professor left the room to check on the other section of the class, only to burst through the door moments later: "The pope is a Villanovan!"



Robert Prevost, the future Pope Leo XIV, during his senior year at Villanova University in Villanova, Pa., is pictured in this undated photo. (OSV News/Courtesy of Villanova University)

Needless to say, that was a difficult test to finish.

"I just remember, like, tears coming to my eye, I was so excited for what it was gonna bring to campus," Reens said. "So many thoughts were going through my mind, which is not great during an exam, but I was just so proud to be a Villanovan in that moment."

That overwhelming sense of exhilaration was shared on campus. The now-pope had walked through the same hallways, studied in the same library, and eaten at the same dining hall table that had once felt so mundane.

The bells of St. Thomas of Villanova Church rang proudly for hours. The bells of Corr Hall chimed the alma mater for people across campus to hum along. Students eagerly greeted their friends: "Did you hear? The pope is a Villanovan!"

"I'm surprised the bells aren't still ringing," Michael Blake, a Villanova undergraduate '25 and '26 theology graduate student, said in August. "I have to assume it was a similar feeling to when the Wildcats won the national championship."

"We all just started, like, screaming with just absolute joy and elation because we were, like, this is someone that we know," said Peggy Murray, Villanova undergraduate '25.

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.

Blake and Murray also met Cardinal Prevost at the same Mass as Reens.

"We were crammed in the crypt chapel of St. Peter's, and we were all on the edge of our seats listening," recounted Blake. "I mean, [he's] just very well-spoken, very humble, very quiet. He sits in the room, observes, takes it all in, thinks and then speaks. And when he speaks, you really want to listen."

"We all have a picture with him, we, you know, shook his hand, said hello to him," Murray said. "Having that degree of intimacy with someone who is now the pope is so completely unheard of."



Newly elected Pope Leo XIV appears at the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican, on May 8, 2025. (AP photo/Bernat Armangue)

While these students had gotten the chance to meet Leo XIV while he was a cardinal, some members of the Villanova community have known him for years.

Fr. Arthur Purcaro, Assistant Vice President of Mission and Ministry at Villanova University, first met and befriended Robert Prevost, or "Bob," as he still refers to him, while he was serving as a missionary in Peru.

"He's entirely Augustinian," said Purcaro. "He studied and knows what it is to follow Augustine's pathway towards Christ. He's a community builder, and he's a bridge builder."

In April 2025, then-Cardinal Prevost invited Purcaro to Rome to commemorate his 50th ordination anniversary. Because Pope Francis' passing had occurred just before his departure, Prevost invited Purcaro to preside over the funeral mass.

That's why Purcaro was in Italy when Prevost was elected.

"From the very moment he walked out on that balcony May 8th, [his] first word was peace," Purcaro said. "As Christ said to his disciples, 'peace for you.' Peace for your family, peace for the whole world. This is very much the person who Bob Prevost is and became by working in the mission, because it's to reach out to those that have been left out...We're one family."

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Because Prevost always sought to bridge the divides between society, choosing the name Leo holds value.

Pope Leo XIII devoted his life to social justice. Through his work, Rerum Novarum, he established the foundations of Catholic social thought, which emphasizes human dignity as the root of a just society.

"I think today we're seeing some kind of a similar revelation with AI," Blake said. "And I think Pope Leo XIV is trying to really draw that message home that we are kind of in this new age of revelation, this age of technology, where we do need to be grounded in ourselves somewhat strongly, so we know we are making the right choices, so we're not taking advantage of the poor, the marginalized, those who do not have the resources, or the possibility to advocate for themselves."

Catholic social thought is prevalent at Villanova. Purcaro teaches a course about it, and the University hosts an annual workshop for faculty to grasp its importance and contents in order to include aspects of it in their syllabi.

Just as Leo XIII's teachings have been adopted at Villanova, the teachings of Leo XIV are sure to follow.

The excitement on campus has not dissipated since his election. Villanovans will continue to share their thoughts surrounding his papal name and his advocacy for peace.

And Reens is sure to continue wearing her silver rosary necklace, just as she did the day she met the future Pope Leo XIV.

This story appears in the **Views on the first U.S. pope** feature series. View the full series.

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 10-23, 2025** print issue under the headline: Villanova students hope for social teaching, human dignity from pope.