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Screenshot from documentary "Leo from Chicago"

The Vatican Dicastery for Communication released the documentary "Leo from Chicago," which chronicles the pope's early life in Dolton, Ill., as well as his early years as an Augustinian. It was released Nov. 10. (OSV News screenshot/Vatican News - English YouTube)

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A new documentary released by the Vatican on Pope Leo XIV's early life is more than just a film about the life of the new pope, but the story of an ordinary person who answered a calling to serve the church, said Vatican News journalist Salvatore Cernuzio.

Released Nov. 10, the documentary "Leo from Chicago" chronicles the pope's humble beginnings in Dolton, Illinois, as well as his early years as an Augustinian.

"A colleague told me, 'It certainly seems like you have told the story of a saint,' " Cernuzio said in a phone interview with OSV News Nov. 11.

"I believe it's not a question of sainthood; it's about a person who was born with a meek character. His charism is truly this meekness and, above all, how he developed these particular traits of dialogue, of friendship, of community."

The film was produced by the Dicastery for Communication, along with the Archdiocese of Chicago and the Apostolado El Sembrador Nueva Evangelización (ESNE), a Spanish-language Catholic TV apostolate.

Pope Leo's childhood home

The childhood home of Pope Leo XIV in the Dolton, Ill., a suburb of Chicago is pictured May 9, 2025. (OSV News/Carlos Osorio, Reuters)

According to the Vatican, the documentary — which was produced by Cernuzio and fellow Vatican News journalists Deborah Castellano Lubov and Felipe Herrera-Espaliat — retraces "the story, family roots, studies, and Augustinian vocation of Robert Francis Prevost in his native United States."

Available on the Vatican News' YouTube channel, "Leo from Chicago" serves as a follow-up to "León de Perú," which focused on "the future pope's missionary years in South America," the Vatican said.

Cernuzio, who was also involved in the production of "León de Perú" which was released in June, said the first documentary "went a bit into the heart of his ministry, but it was still the story of people who experienced a man who came from outside."

However, "Leo from Chicago" gathers testimonies from those who "experienced him at the same level: as a schoolmate, a student, a biological brother, and even a brother in the religious order who did his novitiate with him."

"He is a pope we know more about compared to June, but we are still getting to know him, and whose characteristics and nuances of his personality we have not yet fully grasped," Cernuzio told OSV News. " 'Leo from Chicago' opens a window in this sense, meaning it helps to understand this man's attitude in relationships, his goals and his vocation."

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—Salvatore Cernuzio

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After chronicling the pope's formative years in two documentaries, Cernuzio noted that what stood out most was his "fundamental consistency."

"From when he was a child until he became a priest and then left for Peru, he has always been somewhat the same person," he said. "He is a man who didn't have conflicts, who cared about establishing serious bonds with people, who didn't forget the people he visited, and who always showed a good character — a kind, docile person who was open to dialogue. So, in this sense, his personality is consistent."

For Cernuzio, the pope was not only connected to the U.S. Catholic Church, as evidenced by his participation in the annual March for Life, but also gained a broader perspective on the church during his missionary days in Peru.

It was there, he said, that Leo saw another side of the church that required "what Pope Francis called 'getting one's hands dirty.' "

"So, the March for Life also became a march for human rights, for the poor, for defending women and children against violence, and for the rights of workers and the oppressed," he said.

A mural dedicated to Pope Leo XIV at White Sox field

A mural dedicated to Pope Leo XIV, alongside a special Pope Leo No. 14 Chicago White Sox jersey, is unveiled in Section 140 of Rate Field, the White Sox's ballpark, in Chicago, May 19, 2025. (OSV News/Courtesy of the Chicago White Sox)

Cernuzio told OSV News that he was moved by the testimony of Fr. Tom McCarthy, an Augustinian priest who has known the new pope more than four decades.

McCarthy, he recalled, said then-Fr. Prevost "could have had a great position in a diocese or a seminary. Instead of canon law and all those years of study, what did he choose? He chose the poor."

That missionary experience, Cernuzio added, "enriched" the pope's views and perspective of the church's mission in the world.

"He has this treasure accumulated within him from school, university, his studies, and his prestigious assignments. But at the same time, he has an enormous background: this experience of over 20 years in Peru, where he truly learned what it means to concretize the Gospel among people who need that message," he said.

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Cernuzio said he hoped that those who see the documentary will understand "the guiding threads of his personality and how he lives out his charisms and roles."

Other details, like his love of the Chicago White Sox, his emotions at watching the Blues Brothers, and his affinity for pepperoni pizza, are "details that also show the normalcy of this person."

"He is a normal man, called by God and chosen by the cardinals to lead the universal church," Cernuzio said.