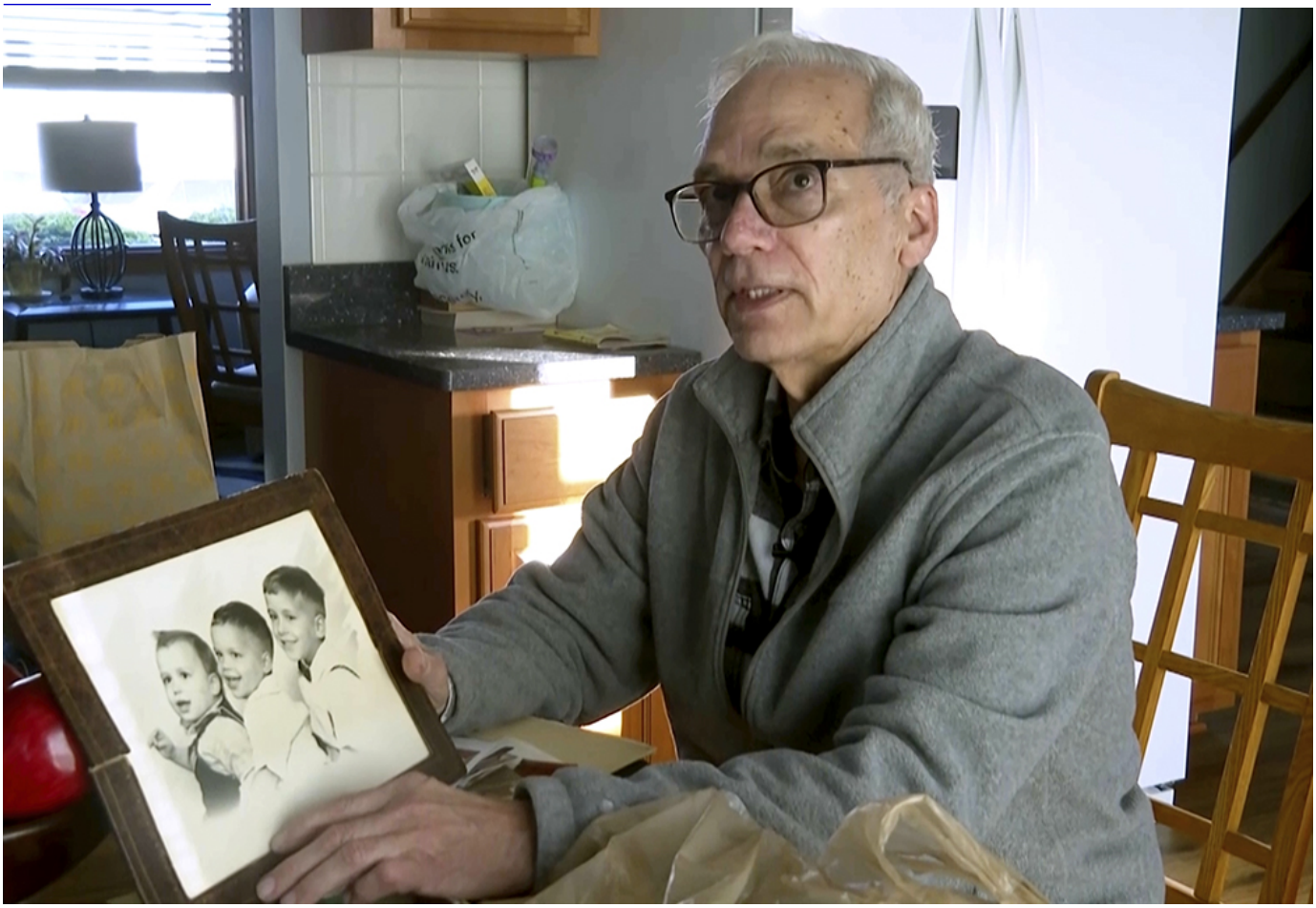
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John Prevost, brother of Pope Leo XIV, holds a portrait of the three Prevost brothers from 1958 — Leo (then Robert), 3, left, John, 4, and Louis, 7 — at his home Thursday, May 8, 2025, in New Lenox, Illinois. (AP photo/Obed Lamy)



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Editor's Note: *As part of NCR's ongoing series, "Looking for Leo in History," NCR sat down for more than an hour with John Prevost, the brother of Pope Leo XIV, at his parish in New Lenox, Illinois. John, the middle of the three Prevost brothers, lives not far from where the family grew up in a south suburb of Chicago. This excerpt from the interview focuses on the brothers' childhood, family life and early faith formation. A second segment follows Robert Prevost's life through his brother's eyes from the time he left home for seminary through his election to the papacy. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.*



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

NCR: What was Dolton, Illinois, the neighborhood you grew up in, like?

Prevost: There was nothing really out of the ordinary about Dolton. The block was a block. You knew everyone that was living on the block. What people don't quite understand is [Robert] left home right after eighth grade. He was 12, 13, when he left home. He was back for summers and that's about it, and once in a while for holidays. So it was a short period of time really when you think of all the stuff he's done. But it was a regular neighborhood. We knew most people on the block and it was in the days where you just went out and played. It was safe; parents trusted that you'd be safe if you ran away and came home for dinner.



A tribute sign to Pope Leo XIV is displayed outside a hot dog stand in the Dolton suburb of Chicago, May 9, 2025, where Pope Leo grew up as Robert F. Prevost. The manager said the pope's two brothers used to stop by there for hot dogs — with no ketchup, a signature Chicago hotdog. (OSV News/Simone Orendain)

Was it a diverse neighborhood?

[St. Mary of the Assumption] school and the neighborhood was all white.

What was the relationship with the local church, would a lot of the people in the neighborhood go to the same parish?

There were a lot of the neighborhood kids that went to St. Mary's School, and a lot of neighbors that went to St. Mary's Parish. And it was a true neighborhood with parish boundaries. If you crossed the street, you went to Queen of Apostles [Parish]. So yeah, it was neighborhood church, neighborhood school and the other kids went to the public school.

[*Editor's note*: Robert Prevost, the future Pope Leo XIV, attended St. Augustine Seminary High School in Holland, Michigan.]



A drone view May 9, 2025, shows St. Mary of the Assumption Church at the very southern edge of Chicago, where Pope Leo XIV attended Mass with his family while he was growing up. The church, vacant since 2011, is now in the planning stages for a possible community center, workers' training program and place of worship for area church congregations. (OSV News/Reuters/Carlos Osorio)

How would you describe the parenting style you grew up with?

It was kind of strict when you compare it to today. I don't think it was unreasonable. Of course, you would get mad because they tell you no, but probably the biggest arguments were over who got the car, because we had one car in the family and there were three of us. But when Rob came home, it didn't matter, Rob got the car.

And I would say most of the parents on the blocks were about the same. It was a traditional two-parent household. For the most part, dad went to work, mom stayed home and watched the kids. And then periodically, moms would get together for coffee and gossip.

And you grew up in a divided sports household?

In a sense it was. Rob's team was the [White] Sox, our dad's team was the St. Louis Cardinals, and our mom's was the Cubs.

So, those three teams are playing, what game was on?

There were two TVs in the bedrooms, so whoever "won" got the color TV downstairs, the others had to go upstairs. And that was for any kind of program, we never all wanted to watch the same program at the same time. So the others would go to the black-and-white TVs upstairs. It was peaceful, peaceful and calm. No arguments there.



Pope Leo XIV wears a Chicago White Sox baseball cap during his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican June 11, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Remo Casilli)

Were there any TV programs you all watched together as a family?

I think on Monday nights "Carol Burnett" would win and we all watched that. I think "Dragnet" was one that we all watched. There had to have been others.

Did you have a relationship with your extended family?

We did. You know, the big [holidays] like Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter, we did them at our house. But then as the families began to grow, there were more and more kids, so then it was just Northsiders stayed up north and the Southsiders stayed down south.

Your father was a school superintendent, your mother was a librarian and you became a school principal. It seems safe to say that education was really important in the household.

I think so. I think all three of us somehow followed in our parents' footsteps, but they didn't twist our arms or say, "You have to do this, you have to do that." But I think we kind of all were influenced by them.



In this undated photo, Pope Leo XIV (then Robert Prevost, left) smiles while his mother (back to the camera) cuts a birthday cake in what his brother (right) guessed was the pope's ninth birthday, at the family home in Dolton, Illinois. (OSV News/Prevost family)

What did dinner look like in the Prevost house growing up?

As we were growing up, dinner was at 5:30 p.m. and all five of us ate at the same time. It was: "It's time to eat, come on," or, "Get your homework done; it's time for dinner." That was it. And then of course, you ate what you were served or you didn't eat. [Mom] didn't cook five meals. Other than me, they were all easygoing. Rob was very good at eating everything. I'm not.

And the conversation?

"What happened in school?" Things like that.

Do you remember when JFK was elected president in 1960? You would have been about 6 years old.

I don't remember that, but I do remember us glued to the TV watching the funeral, because all the schools were closed. I do actually remember sitting down and watching the funeral. We all did that.

Did you have any exposure to foreign languages growing up?

Yes. I do remember as kids, my dad was trying to get us into the French language. So there were times there, particularly in summer, because he didn't want us just lying around playing all day long. He had a series of French language albums to teach us that and we would have to sit there and repeat all kinds of things.

I think he chose French because of "Prevost," because of the family background, as real as it may or may not be. And that's what I majored in in college. For Rob, there's where it might have started. I've often wondered, "Where does he pick it up?" Well, he has an ear for languages.

[*Editor's note*: Leo is a noted linguist and speaks fluent English, Spanish and Italian. He reads public speeches in French but is not conversational in the language and is said to be learning German.]

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What was your family's connection to the Augustinians growing up?

Our older brother Louis (known in the family as 'Marty') went to Mendel, which was an Augustinian high school. And then two or three years later, I went. When we were in high school our mother worked two, maybe three, days a week in the high school library, but I don't think that would've had any choice in Rob's decision [to join the Augustinians] because he wouldn't have been there.

When Robert was deciding, he knew he was going to be a priest. He just didn't know whether it would be religious or diocesan. I do remember, periodically, vocation directors would come to the house and talk to the family. We would sit around a table and we would talk about different orders and for some reason it's the Augustinian order that he chose. I don't know if it was the vocation director who came and spoke, I really don't know how it happened. This whole thing from birth until now is all [the] work of the Spirit.

How did your parents live with the knowledge that he was going to be a priest? Were they encouraging of that?

They didn't discourage it, but they didn't twist arms either. They said, "Do what you're going to do; if you have questions, ask the questions," but I don't recall them saying, "You're going to be a priest, change your behavior." Nothing like that. Well, Rob never got in trouble anyway.



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 9th birthday cake and ice cream celebration at home, in the Chicago suburb of New Lenox, Illinois. (OSV News/Simone Orendain)

Were all three brothers altar servers?

Yes, at one time or another we were.

This would have been in the mid-'60s, right as the Second Vatican Council is going on. Do you have any memory of that as a child?

When I was in third grade, one of our religion assignments was to do a scrapbook on Vatican II. And when Rob and I started [being altar servers] everything was in Latin, then boom. You've got to learn the prayers all over again in English, but [Rob] of course was a natural.

Also, our aunt was a Mercy nun. At the time, they had those huge, flowing, top-to-bottom habits. After Vatican II, it changed, so we had that talk: Why did our aunt look different in the new habit?

Did you have a lot of engagement with consecrated religious [men and women] growing up?

Probably more than most. At some point, our mom was president of Altar and Rosary Society and she'd have guests over for dinner, and naturally you'd have the priest over for dinner. Then there was at the time when there was a traveling pilgrim virgin that went from home to home, where you would pray the rosary and neighbors would come and parishioners would come. We had it quite often, and all the sisters would come and pray the rosary right after school. We tried to hide because we didn't want our teachers to see us.

That didn't feel scary as children?

At first it might have been, it was probably more embarrassing. I don't know how Rob felt, but for me it was probably more embarrassing.

You prayed the rosary with your family daily?

Our parents did. After dinner, dishes were put away, our parents did and if we happened to be there we did also, but we were never forced. That was never forced on us, but they did every day.

What did prayer life look like in the Prevost household?

Sunday Mass always, rosary regularly, grace before meals, nighttime prayers always. I think more than [my parents] saying "sit down, we're going to pray," it was modeling. When they prayed the rosary there was no TV going on, that's shut off, the radio was shut off. It was just quiet and they prayed the rosary. If you're here, OK. They never forced us to go in there and pray.

[*Part 2 of this interview focuses on when Robert Prevost left home to study at St. Augustine Seminary High School and continue through his election to the papacy. You can read it here.*]

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

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This story appears in the **Looking for Leo in History** feature series. View the full series.

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