News



Kungfu Express owner LinNing Tang and his son Kevin in the restaurant in Rome. In the year leading up to his election to the papacy, Cardinal Robert Prevost — now Pope Leo XIV — would stop at Kungfu Express for his go-to meal. (Kielce Gussie)



by Kielce Gussie

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"I'll have the sweet and sour chicken, spring rolls and the dumplings, please."

That was Cardinal Robert Prevost's usual order when he would stop by one of the local Chinese restaurants tucked away on the Roman streets just outside the Vatican walls.

In 2024, the year leading up to his election to the papacy, the cardinal from Chicago — now Pope Leo XIV — would stop at Kungfu Express for his go-to meal. The owner of the restaurant, LinNing Tang, recalled that he used chopsticks very well.



Then-Cardinal Robert Prevost had two spots where he would usually sit at Kungfu Express in Rome and these signs mark them. (Kielce Gussie)

But Leo was not the only Vatican-related clientele that has made the Chinese restaurant their usual spot for Asian cuisine. Tang, who opened the restaurant five years ago, said it's not uncommon to see the chairs filled with priests, bishops, cardinals and women religious.

"A lot of cardinals live nearby, so sometimes they'd eat here or order takeaway. This is a fast food restaurant, so it's very convenient," he told the National Catholic Reporter.

Of course, it's not every day one of your customers is elected the head of the Catholic Church.

"We have a lot of secretaries from the offices nearby — from Asia, the Pacific Islands, South America — from what they told us, we were not expecting Cardinal Prevost to be elected." Tang had been following the conclave live each day. He remembered feeling surprised when he saw a familiar face on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica.

"This is Cardinal Prevost!" Tang said he recognized the name and face immediately. "I did not expect him to become the future pope. It's really a blessing."

Looking back at his interactions with the new pope, Tang recalled that "Cardinal Prevost was always smiling" and always warm — greeting those in the restaurant and telling them how good the food was.

While the Holy Father isn't able to freely walk down to the restaurant to get his usual order these days, Tang said the restaurant staff knows he's thought about them since being elected.

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On Dec. 8, 2025, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the restaurant workers had a brief opportunity to see the pope as he passed by in his car coming from Piazza di Spagna. Leo greeted Tang and the entire Kungfu Express staff with a big wave.

Not long ago, one of the Swiss Guards, a familiar presence at Kungfu Express, stopped by the restaurant with a special message from the Vatican. "He said that

the pope sends his regards," Tang said.

But beyond the connection Tang has with the pope, he also said he has a deeper link to the Catholic Church as a whole: The first Chinese Catholic bishop was from his home province of Fujian and the first recognized Catholic martyr was beheaded in the same Chinese province.

For Tang, these connections mark an important link — something for which he is grateful to Leo. "I thank Christianity for spreading love during the missions to China. Catholicism not only brought God into China but also knowledge, arts, mathematics and physics and vice versa."



For the Jubilee Year, Tang hung images of important Chinese Catholics around the restaurant Kungfu Express in Rome. (Kielce Gussie)

Now, although the restaurant sits fewer than 700 feet from the Vatican walls, communication between the pope and its owner is limited.

If Tang had the chance to speak to his former customer, he said, he would "thank him and also thank God for bringing Christianity to China. I hope that Pope Leo will pray for the Chinese population. It is very hard, but I hope that he will come to the restaurant to eat here again."

The hospitality of Tang and his son Kevin and the atmosphere of the entire Kungfu Express restaurant can be summed up with a framed Scripture passage that hangs on one of the restaurant's walls: "Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels" (Hebrews 13:2).

"It's our motto that we have to treat guests with love," Tang said. "Without knowing it, we have received angels like Pope Leo."