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Analysis



Pope Leo XIV delivers the Angelus address in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Feb. 15, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Remo Casilli)



by Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js

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Whereas Lent recalls Jesus' time of prayer and fasting in the desert, for a pope it is anything but solitary.

The liturgical season instead opens 40 days of public appearances, liturgies and highly symbolic gestures that could peel back the curtain on a first-year pope's pastoral instincts.

For the somewhat inscrutable Pope Leo XIV, his first Lent offers a window into how he understands the papacy nearly a year into his pontificate. Elected in the Easter season, Leo's Lent comes as his pontificate approaches the one-year mark, adding an element of intentionality to the choices he makes about how to celebrate Lent and offering clues into what the church's preparation for Easter will look like in the Leonine papacy.

Pope as a parish priest

Leo will spend most Sundays of Lent visiting parishes across Rome.

Though Leo's nine months as pope, greatly overlapping with the 2025 Holy Year, have given him plenty of large-scale moments to command crowds, they have also left little space for the type of intimate encounters that showcase a pope's pastoral touch.

His first parish visit as pope took place Feb. 15 in Ostia, the coastal town just outside Rome with a reputation for being rough around the edges.

While Leo spent a large chunk of his career as a missionary priest and bishop in northern Peru, the moment marked the first time he visited a parish in papal white.

Preaching to a community long marked by economic hardship and organized crime activity, Leo spoke directly about youth violence, substance abuse and the corrosive presence of criminal networks. He met with young people, the elderly and infirm, as well as members of the parish pastoral council, urging them to cultivate an "open

church" that reaches out to those beyond its own walls.



Pope Leo XIV greets children gathered in a gymnasium during his pastoral visit to the Parish of Santa Maria Regina Pacis in Ostia Lido, Italy, Feb. 15, 2026. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

St. John Paul II took his title as bishop of Rome to heart. He visited his first parish only two months after being elected pope, returning to the parish where he had spent his Sundays during his time studying in Rome. He went on to regularly visit Roman parishes as pope.

Pope Benedict XVI continued the tradition, though less frequently, and Francis visited Roman parishes to highlight communities on the city's peripheries.

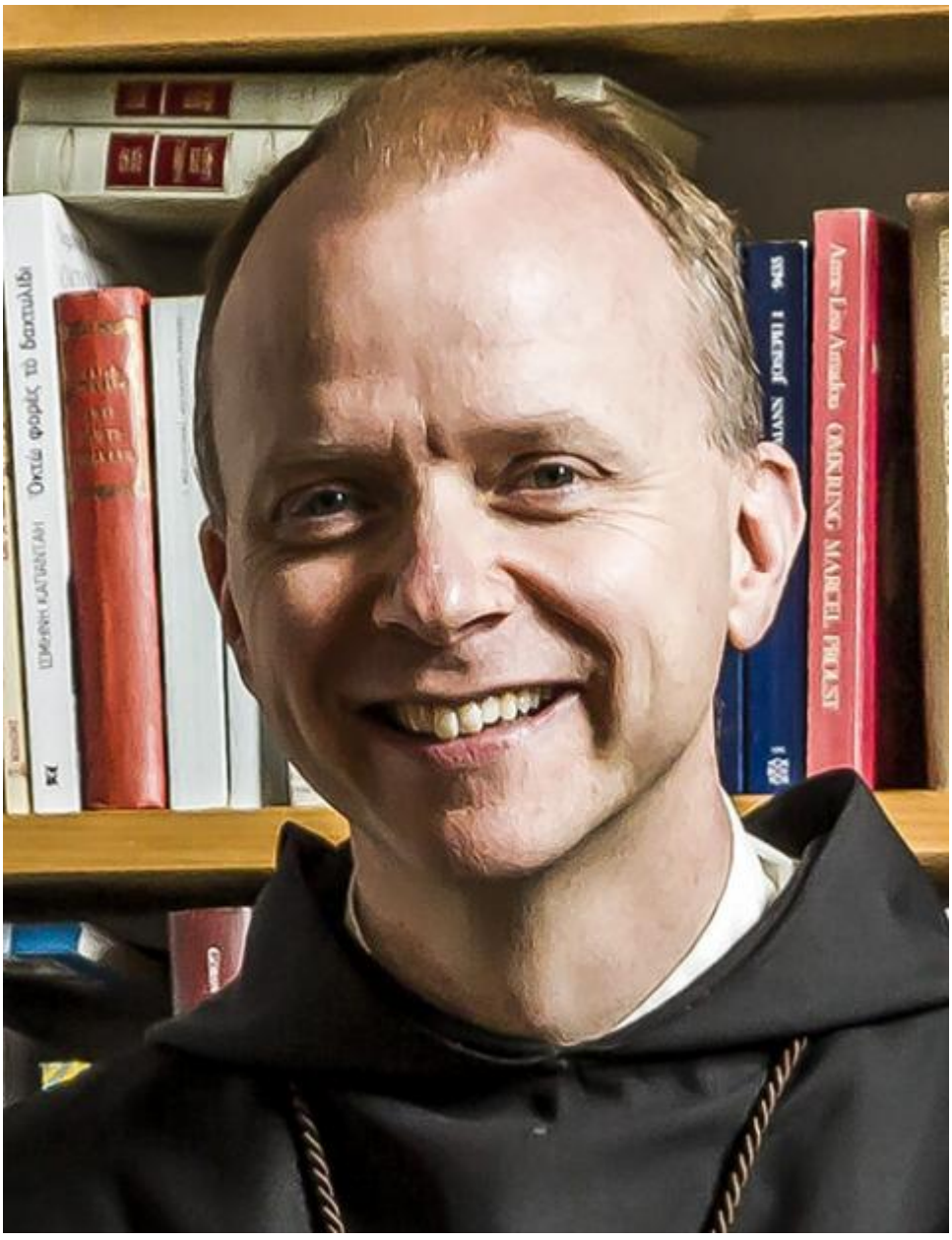
Leo's first parish visit took him to a neighborhood afflicted by hardship, but it could also have been chosen due to its Augustinian resonance: Ostia is where St. Augustine shared a mystical experience with his mother, as recounted in his *Confessions*. She later died in Ostia in Augustine's arms.

The pope will celebrate Mass at each parish and is expected to meet with groups active in parish life, pastoral leaders and young people, putting him in the position to preach to the concrete needs of the communities, from a pulpit very different than that at St. Peter's Basilica.

The pope's advisers on retreat

In an eye-catching move, Leo selected Bishop Erik Varden of Trondheim, Norway, to preach the annual Lenten retreat for the Roman Curia.

A native Norwegian and Trappist monk, Varden has struck the rare balance of becoming a well-known voice among more traditionally-minded Catholic circles while simultaneously being promoted by Francis and currying favor from Leo.



Bishop Erik Varden of Trondheim, Norway (OSV News/Catholic Press Photo)

The bishop has been regularly featured on various conservative outlets, and he delivered the 2025 Erasmus lecture hosted by the conservative journal First Things.

Varden, who has said his conversion to Catholicism was in part prompted by listening to Mahler's Symphony No. 2, "Resurrection," has repeatedly shown a knack for finely pushing back on the ails of modernity — oversexualization, loneliness and hopelessness — from an articulated Catholic perspective in ways that punch above culture war debates.

Writing on synodality, the catchall term for making the church more participatory among all its members, a movement that has been the cause of debate among Catholics, Varden said that synodality must be ordered toward holiness, while a synodality that seeks human goals "must be treated with great caution."

John Paul and Benedict typically tapped senior clergy or prominent theologians to lead the spiritual exercises, but those picked by Francis tended to have lower profiles. Unlike his predecessors, Francis never selected a cardinal to preach at the retreat.

Some of Francis' selections, however, later rose quickly through the curial ranks.

The late pope picked Auxiliary Bishop Angelo De Donatis to preach at the retreat in 2014. In 2017, De Donatis was appointed the papal vicar of Rome — effectively entrusted to run the Rome Diocese of which the pope is the bishop — and the following year he was made a cardinal.

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In 2018, Francis selected Portuguese Fr. José Tolentino de Medonça, a noted scholar and poet, to preach the Lenten retreat. The pope seemed to like what he had to say. Tolentino was made a bishop just months later and then followed a rapid ascent through the Curia, being named to lead the Vatican library and archives and soon after becoming a cardinal and prefect of the newly formed Dicastery for Culture and Education.

Varden will preach to the highest echelons of church next week on the theme "Illuminated by a Hidden Glory."

And his performance could determine whether he is later called to Rome for a position in the Curia.

Yet beyond the preacher, the format of the retreat itself also matters.

Pope Paul VI introduced the yearly Lenten retreat for the Roman Curia in 1964. John Paul II and Benedict XVI held the annual retreat in the Redemptoris Mater Chapel in the Apostolic Palace.

Francis broke with the custom of holding the retreat at the Vatican, instead taking the Curial officials to a retreat center outside of Rome for the spiritual exercises since, "as a good Jesuit," he opted to avoid conducting a retreat in the same place where the participants live and work.

John Paul and Benedict also addressed the Curia at the end of the Lenten retreat, but Francis never did. Whether Leo will do so remains a question mark.



Pope Benedict XVI speaks to members of the Roman Curia during the closing day of a spiritual retreat at the Vatican Feb. 23, 2013. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano via Reuters)

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the retreat was conducted privately in 2021 rather than communally. The group format was then repeatedly scrapped and participants were instead asked to engage on an individual reflection on a common theme, until 2025 when the retreat was held in the Paul VI Hall with the infirm pope following the reflections remotely from the hospital. Since Robert Prevost arrived in Rome as a cardinal in 2023, the future pope would have never participated in a full retreat for members of the Curia with the pope.

Under Leo, the communal retreat will return to the Apostolic Palace, but it will not be held in the Redemptoris Mater Chapel, where the artwork made by the disgraced former Jesuit Fr. Marko Rupnik has become a source of controversy. Instead, it will take place in the Pauline Chapel, the space used by cardinals during conclaves.

Holy Week

The pope's most far-reaching and most visible decisions will come during Holy Week.

Since 1985, popes have asked cardinals, theologians, writers and other groups, including young people, to prepare the spiritual meditations for the Good Friday Way of the Cross service at Rome's Colosseum.

Francis frequently selected voices from the margins, including migrants, trafficking survivors and Christians from war-torn regions, before writing the meditations himself in 2024 and 2025.

The Vatican has not yet announced who will prepare the texts for Leo's first Good Friday service, but the selection will largely be read as an indication of which voices he seeks to amplify and what pastoral priorities he wants to pursue.

And other choices could likewise be scrutinized. The decision to have a Ukrainian and Russian woman carry the cross together during the ceremony in 2022, shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, prompted backlash from the head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church who called the move "untimely."



Pope Francis washes the feet of an inmate at the Rebibbia women's prison on the outskirts of Rome as he celebrates the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper March 28, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Holy Thursday will offer another revealing moment. Whereas popes had typically celebrated Holy Thursday Mass at St. Peter's Basilica or the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the seat of the bishop of Rome, Francis too changed that tradition. He made headlines in the first year of his pontificate by continuing a practice he developed as archbishop of Buenos Aires of celebrating Holy Thursday Mass in a prison and washing the feet of non-Catholics and women, in a papal first.

The late pope continued to celebrate Holy Thursday in prisons for each year of his pontificate; the last time he presided over the washing of the feet was in 2024 when he washed the feet of 12 women at a women's prison on the outskirts of Rome.

Leo will bring the Holy Thursday celebration back to the Lateran in his first year. Who will have their feet washed by the pope remains to be seen.

All of it culminates on Easter Sunday, when the pope delivers the *urbi et orbi* blessing, "to the city and to the world," a moment that typically combines a proclamation of the Resurrection with pointed references to global crises and appeals for peace.

Last year, that blessing became the final public appearance for Francis, who greeted the crowds in St. Peter's Square with his feeble voice before dying the following day.

This year, the question is what Leo will say as his voice booms from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica.

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