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Analysis



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/Remo Casilli, via Reuters)



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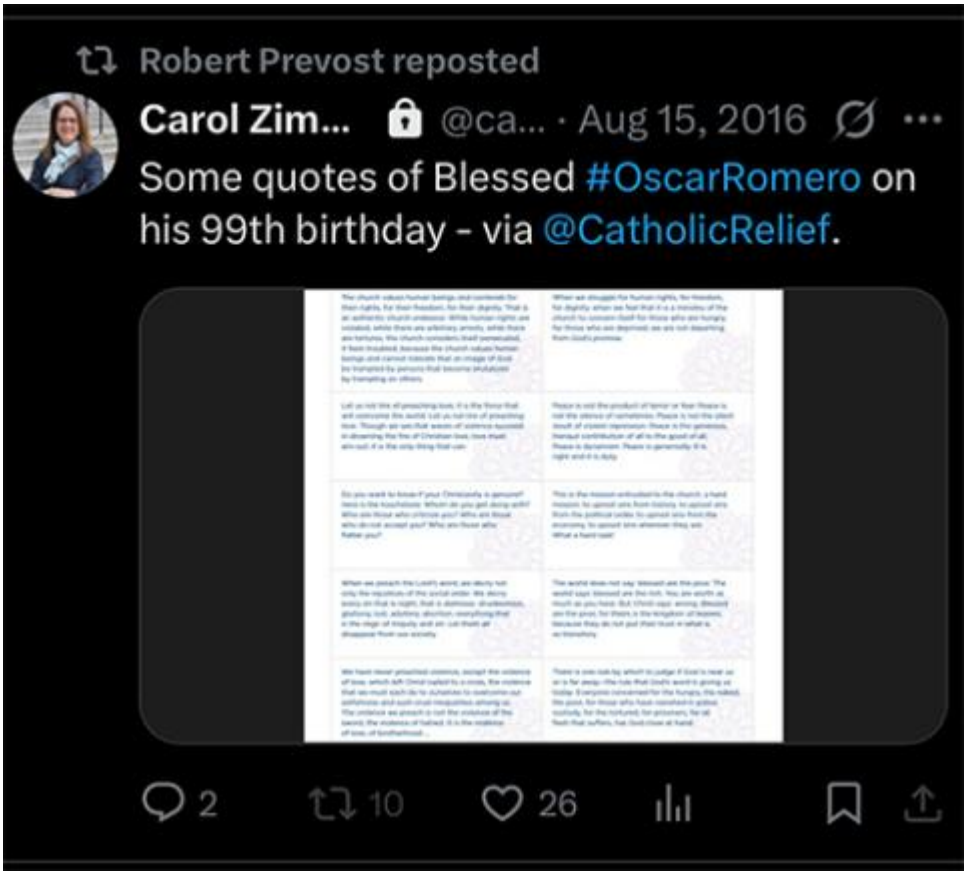
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When Cardinal Robert Prevost appeared on the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica as the leader of the world's 1.4 billion Catholics a year ago, U.S. Catholics were quick — and thrilled — to cheer one of their own: a pope from the South Side of Chicago.

The amazement that someone from the United States was elected pope had people looking for any and all bits of news they could find on him, particularly anything that might make him seem relatable. Journalists wrote stories about his childhood home in the Chicago suburb of Dolton; his now-closed childhood parish, St. Mary of the Assumption in Riverdale where he was an altar boy; his Philadelphia Villanova University college days; his Augustinian order; his two brothers and his love of baseball, White Sox, not the Cubs, as initially reported.

Random photos appeared online from school events and yearbooks and there was also a 2005 photo of him attending a World Series White Sox game against the Houston Astros, holding a flip phone, no less.

My personal favorite, which showed up in the early days of his pontificate, is a clip from a few years ago in which he had clearly been waiting for something for a while, an interview maybe. He makes a slight expression to indicate the wait — opening his mouth in an almost half yawn and raising his eyebrows — before looking at his phone. It stands out because it just seems so normal; we've all been there. He's not too mad, because he has a slight smile, but he's maybe just ever so slightly annoyed.



A screenshot of X taken on May 8, 2025, shows Robert Prevost's repost of a tweet by Carol Zimmermann in 2016. (NCR screenshot)

My own link to Leo before he was named pope, is that when he was bishop of Chiclayo in Peru, Robert Prevost retweeted something I posted on Twitter. My Aug. 15, 2016, tweet — made when I was a reporter at the now-closed Washington bureau of Catholic News Service — was a photo from Catholic Relief Services highlighting some of St. Óscar Romero's famous quotes on what would have been his 99th birthday.

Our digital editor, John Grosso, discovered the retweet the day of the pope's election on May 8, 2025, and took a screenshot of it and sent it to me, which was good because it didn't take long for the new pope's X account to be closed, replaced by the @Pontifex handle.

That retweet — he was one of 10 to do so — is of course a very distant connection for me with Leo. I mean it certainly wasn't like having the future pope over for dinner, as former NCR Vatican correspondent John Allen and his wife, Elise, did in 2024, but still, it was something.

My other even more remote connection with the leader of the world's Catholics is our shared Wordle habit. Leo's brother John told a reporter that the pope still plays Wordle, a word game on the New York Times app that millions of people, myself included, play each day. Some days when I'm particularly challenged by it, I can't help thinking, did the pope get it? And if he didn't, did he make that frustrated expression?

Other insights on Leo's regular self include his appreciation of the book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, his acceptance of a hard candy from Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of the Philippines during the final papal vote count of the conclave, and his previous frequent takeout orders from Kungfu Express near the Vatican while he was prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops.



Then-Bishop Robert Prevost of Chiclayo, Peru, greets a member of his flock in an undated photo. (OSV News/Courtesy of Caritas Chiclayo, via Janina Sesa, former director)

These images of him being relatable are nothing new or put on, as our Rome reporter Justin McLellan found out last summer in Peru while talking to people who knew Leo during his years as a missionary priest there. McLellan wrote that the parishioners "remember him in their homes, sitting at kitchen tables, sipping lemongrass tea, listening to concerns about parish life."

"He wasn't the kind of priest who stayed in the church. He was like a member of the family," said a former parishioner of Our Lady of Montserrat in Trujillo, Peru, where then-Fr. Prevost was parochial administrator.

The notion of the global leader of the Catholic Church playing a word game, previously lingering at a parishioner's kitchen table, or going to a ballgame does make him seem more human, more relatable, somewhat on par with the old saying about likeable politicians, that you'd want to have a beer with them. But in this case, maybe you'd want to stroll the grounds of Castel Gandolfo (papal summer residence and now Leo's Tuesday spot) with him. I would choose that!

What we know about him blends a little bit of the mystery of our church and Vatican life in particular with aspects of ordinary life.

And this ordinariness can be a model for us. As Meghan Clark, professor of moral theology at St. John's University in New York, told me: "I love reading about Pope Leo's relationship with his brothers. It is beautiful and ordinary. In becoming Leo XIV, deep familial bonds remain. In their bond, we recognize the ways the pope is just like the rest of us" — even in simply trying to beat siblings at word games.

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Mathew Schmalz, professor of religious studies at the College of the Holy Cross, said Leo has maybe not gone as far as Pope Francis with letting go of many of the "formal trappings of the papacy," but he is still more relatable than previous popes.

He also says there is more to learn about Leo.

"When I hear him speak, I hear not so much an American Catholic and veteran of the culture wars. I hear a voice shaped by the experiences and concerns of the Global South," Schmalz said in an email.

As he put it: Leo "combines American and Peruvian sensibilities in a complex way that we have yet to sort out fully. That's mystery enough for me — a good mystery that expands our sense of what it means to be Catholic."

In other words: stayed tuned for year two.

This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV's First Year** feature series. View the full series.