Opinion

NCR Voices



Pope Leo XIV stands with his crosier as he celebrates Mass at the Basilica of St. Augustine in Annaba, Algeria, April 14, 2026. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Simone Risoluti)



by Michael Sean Winters

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In the days between the funeral of Pope Francis and the conclave that elected Pope Leo XIV, The New York Times' Jason Horowitz published an interesting story with the headline "As Cardinals Prepare to Elect a Pope, One Motto is 'Unity.' That's Divisive." He explained that the call for unity was coming from conservative cardinals who wanted to roll back Francis' initiatives, which they viewed as divisive. Instead, the cardinals chose a cardinal who was profoundly committed to continuing the reforms Francis had begun.

Yet, since his election, Leo has made unity one of his principal themes. What the conservative cardinals wanted was a unity on their terms, a heckler's veto. Instead, Leo is pursuing a unity that is founded on the person of Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel. As my colleague Justin McLellan explained in his incisive roundup of the pope's trip to Africa, "Instead of fixing the church's gaze solely on the problems that plague it, in Algeria Leo lifted it upward, insisting that reform be guided by charity and rooted in the proclamation of the Gospel." For Leo, as for most of the cardinals who elected him, this is precisely what Francis tried to do, but Leo is pursuing ecclesial reform with a softer touch, and perhaps more consideration toward conservatives than Francis demonstrated.

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We moderns tend to forget that the first word Jesus used when he proclaimed the Gospel was "Repent." As I have noted before, the Catholic right tends to reduce sin to sexual sins and the Catholic left reduces it to injustice. Leo, on the plane ride back from Africa, and having confronted the poverty and inequality that plagues the people of that continent, announced his priorities, saying: "First of all, I think it's very important that the unity or division of the church should not revolve around sexual matters. We tend to think that when the church is talking about morality that the only issue of morality is sexual. And in reality I believe there are greater and more

important issues such as justice, equality, freedom of men and women, freedom of religion that would all take priority before that particular issue."

Many of us agree that it is wrong to overemphasize sins of a sexual nature. Still, Leo might have framed the issue a bit differently. The "holy restlessness" of which the pope spoke in his address at the Catholic University of Central Africa is rooted in something deeper than sexual sins or injustice, something to do with pride and concupiscence.

In the Rule of St. Augustine, the great saint teaches: "Indeed, every other kind of sin has to do with the commission of evil deeds, whereas pride lurks even in good works in order to destroy them. And what good is it to scatter one's wealth abroad by giving to the poor, even to become poor oneself, when the unhappy soul is thereby more given to pride in despising riches than it had been in possessing them?" This insight into the complexity of human motivations is one of Augustine's most distinctive characteristics. Like Shakespeare, Augustine seems almost modern because his insights, not just his ideas, are so deep, they resonate across the centuries.

Canon 2514 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "St. John distinguishes three kinds of covetousness or concupiscence: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of life. In the Catholic catechetical tradition, the ninth commandment forbids carnal concupiscence; the tenth forbids coveting another's goods." It is interesting that the deadliest of the seven deadly sins, pride, does not figure into the Ten Commandments, except perhaps the first. Look around. Is America not drowning in false gods?



Pope Leo XIV prays in front of a statue of Mary and the Christ Child as he celebrates the final Mass of his apostolic journey to Africa at Malabo Stadium in Equatorial Guinea April 23, 2026. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Matteo Pernaselci)

Sin manifests itself in many ways, but it is always a deviation from God's will as that will has been revealed to us in the Scriptures and the tradition of the church, both of which spring from the same source, the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The Second Vatican Council proclaimed:

> In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1;15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. This plan of

> revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation. (*Dei verbum #2*)

The problem of our time is that half the church thinks it is following God's will because it conforms to what the church teaches about sexual matters and the other half thinks it is following God's will because it conforms to what the church teaches about social justice. Both groups tend to self-assertion and pride in their stances and, just so, display the degree to which they stand convicted of that deadliest of sins: pride. Both, also, become allergic, even hostile, to any sense of correction or conversion to which they might be called. We moderns do not make a golden calf as the Israelites did (cf. Exodus 32). No, we just look in the mirror and admire what we see. The ease with which we denounce others, even those of previous centuries, further betrays the pridefulness that is so common among the affluent Catholics of the United States.

After Leo's trip to Africa, my friend and colleague Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese wrote a column asking if the continent really was the future of the Catholic Church. Citing patterns of birth rates and the consequences of urbanization, he wrote: "There is no reason that the African church will be immune from the same pressures that impacted the church in the West, especially given the ubiquity of social media and internet access."

This is perhaps true, but Reese misses the real issue. Africa's people are mostly poor and we in the West are mostly rich. Jesus announced his ministry in the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel, saying: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me, to proclaim good news to the poor." We in the West are no longer poor. We know our worth. We possess self-esteem. We know our minds, too. Maybe we can no longer hear the call of salvation in the word "Repent!" Maybe, just maybe, we no longer have the ability to hear the good news. I hope the son of Augustine who sits on the chair of Peter will teach us all how to be poor again.

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