News
News
Religious Life



Pope Leo XIV waves as he arrives to lead his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican April 29, 2026. (GSR graphic/Olivia Bardo; OSV News photo/Reuters/Remo Casilli)



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May 7, 2026
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One year ago, cautious hope surrounded what Pope Leo XIV would bring to the Holy See after Pope Francis' 12-year pontificate, which championed sisters' priorities and elevated them to unprecedented positions of power in the Vatican.

Now, a year into Leo's papacy, sisters around the world are celebrating how — in his own, quiet style — the first U.S.-born pope is continuing to focus on issues near and dear to them.

In Rome, Sr. Roxanne Schares, the executive secretary of the International Union of Superiors General and a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, told Global Sisters Report that she believes Leo "clearly continues the social justice emphasis of Pope Francis." She noted Leo's many statements and in particular his first apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te*, "with its focus on Christ's love for the poor and the call for all of us to renew our commitment to those most in need."

She said Leo's recent 11-day visit to four African countries "reflects such a commitment, as does his plan to visit Lampedusa [Italy] in July, where many migrants continue to arrive from countries of the Global South that are impacted by injustice, violent conflict, seeking safety and life with dignity."

Schares, who was appointed by Francis in 2021 to the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, said Leo's prior international experiences bring "valuable dimensions to his papacy that includes insights from Augustinian theology and spirituality, particularly around unity, and a width and depth of experience of our global church."

In Indonesia, Missionaries of Mary Sr. Angela Marici, who is her congregation's Indonesian Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation coordinator, said Leo "has shown a strong commitment to justice work in his first year."



Missionaries of Mary Sr. Angela Marici (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

"He has taken meaningful steps to raise awareness about key issues and has actively supported initiatives that promote fairness and accountability," Marici told GSR. While there is still room for growth, she said, "especially in expanding the impact of these efforts, his approach so far reflects consistency and a genuine concern for justice."

Overall, she said, the pontiff's first year "can be seen as a solid foundation for more substantial contributions in the future."

For many sisters in Africa, Leo's April visit to Algeria, Cameroon, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea was experienced as recognition of a continent central to the life

and future of the global church. It also affirmed the role of religious sisters and local leaders who minister in impoverished communities mired in conflict, said Sr. Nkhensani Shibambu, a member of the Congregation of the Companions of St. Angela, a diocesan congregation based in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Related: As Pope Leo leaves Africa, nuns say harder task begins: Turning his message into reality

"His presence carried a pastoral message of closeness," she said. "In Africa, symbolic gestures matter greatly, and the fact that he came early in his papacy demonstrated humility, listening and solidarity. For our community, it renewed a sense of belonging to the universal church and encouraged us to continue serving with hope despite many social and economic challenges."

But Africa "becoming more central" and being engaged in the church should go "beyond ceremonial visits," she continued.

"It would also be valuable for him to create more spaces where African theologians, religious sisters, young people and lay leaders can contribute meaningfully to global church conversations," she said. "Africa has rich spiritual and cultural perspectives that can enrich the universal church."

Related: With Rome's gaze toward Africa, nuns reflect on Pope Leo XIV's first year

'Moral courage'

In the United States, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents about two-thirds of the country's nearly 35,000 Catholic sisters, said it is deeply grateful for his thoughtful and discerning approach to leadership.

"We are especially appreciative of his moral courage in speaking with clarity and compassion on behalf of human dignity and the common good," the group told GSR in a statement. "His witness as a global leader continues to inspire hope and a renewed commitment to justice and peace."



Basilian Sr. Ann Laszok (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Sr. Ann Laszok, a Ukrainian American and a member of Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great, also praised Leo's first year, telling GSR that she believes "Pope Leo is a godsend and truly amazing."

"Pope Leo's condemnation of what is morally wrong is desperately needed today," Laszok said. "He's been a breath of hope for Ukrainians with his prayerful and humanitarian support of Ukraine. He has openly stated who is the victim and who is the aggressor in this war and has actively engaged in the return of the kidnapped Ukrainian children by the Russians."

Sr. Suzanne Jabro, of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, who served in prison ministry and now tends to border issues in California, said Leo's being American gives him an understanding of its society and politics others may lack, noting the recent "nonsense" out of Washington, including attacks on church teaching by executive branch officials and politicians like Vice President JD Vance telling the pontiff to be careful with theology.

In general, she said, she is happy to see the direction the church is taking and is grateful for "the articulation of the Gospel message of peace to the world."

"I am moved positively by what is happening with church leadership right now," Jabro said. "I've been in this for 30-some years, and for years it was the great silence. That's not so anymore."

She said she doesn't believe it's because prelates weren't thinking correctly, but now the prophetic voice of the church is being articulated loud and clear.



Nuns arrive ahead of a June 14, 2025, Mass in honor of Pope Leo XIV at Rate Field in Chicago, home of the Chicago White Sox baseball team. The Chicago-born pontiff,

elected May 8, 2025, is the first U.S.-born pope in history. (OSV News/Reuters/Carlos Osorio)

Jabro said she's grateful that Leo has continued with the spirit of Francis in his own way.

"He's more careful," she said. "To me, it seems Francis was a little more edgy."

But judging by the way Leo has handled criticisms and responded with the Gospel, "he's the right person for the job," she said.

'Prophetic balance'

Comboni Sr. Clara Torres Acevedo, of Mexico, noted that while some were afraid when they saw Leo don the elegant papal vestments that Francis had set aside and announce a return to the Apostolic Palace, those moves seem to be about appeasing different groups in the church, she said.

"I think he knows how to strike a prophetic balance while still accommodating conservatives to some extent," she said, adding that Leo seems like a person of depth and intelligence

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She was happy to see his response to U.S. President Donald Trump and how the pope publicly addressed recent controversy. Trump had criticized Leo in an incendiary social media post April 12, alleging Leo "thinks it's OK for Iran to have a Nuclear Weapon," is "terrible on Foreign Policy" and "WEAK on crime."

"It is important that our shepherd maintain this free and unconditional stance in the face of these tyrants of the world," Torres said. "He is quite the missionary."

But as a sister who works to stop human trafficking and felt great support from Francis, she would like to hear more from Leo on the issue, she added.

Marici noted that Indonesia's 8.5 million Catholics have generally responded positively to the pope.

She believes that the pope "understands Indonesia quite well," given that he had visited the country when he served as leader of the Augustinians, which has several communities in Indonesia. "He has emphasized themes such as interreligious harmony, social justice, and care for vulnerable communities — issues that strongly resonate here."



Sr. Eileen Reilly of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (Courtesy of Eileen Reilly)

She said that the pontiff's ties to countries like Indonesia have contributed to a deeper understanding of regional realities, including religious diversity and social challenges. "This has strengthened confidence among many that his leadership is

both globally minded and locally aware."

Though Leo has continued to focus on many of the same things as Francis, Sr. Eileen Reilly, the religious engagement associate for the anti-death penalty group Catholic Mobilizing Network, said you cannot really compare the two — especially after only one year in office.

"He's been such a gift and so often unfairly compared to Francis," said Reilly, a School Sister of Notre Dame. "He's brought his own beliefs and passions to the job."

One of those gifts was forcefully reaffirming the Catholic Church's stance that there is never justification for capital punishment, when Leo spoke in a video message to participants in an event at Chicago's DePaul University marking the 15th anniversary of Illinois' abolition of the death penalty. He also reiterated his support for those fighting to abolish the death penalty.

"It was just so powerful to hear those words coming from his mouth," Reilly said. "For the first time in my life, I felt a pope was addressing me personally."

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