News



Italy's top-ranked tennis player Jannik Sinner, left, shares a light moment with Pope Leo XIV during a meeting at the Vatican May 14, 2025. (AP/Vatican Media)

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Paris — June 13, 2026

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Editor's note: This is part of an occasional series on Augustinian spirituality. Pope Leo XIV is the first pope from the Order of St. Augustine, a religious order founded in 1244 on the values of community and friendship; service to the poor; and intellectual pursuits. Today there are some 2,800 Augustinians across 47 countries.

When Pope Leo XIV was elected last year and it emerged that he was a tennis player, his love of the sport was quickly celebrated during an audience with top-ranked Jannik Sinner.

In the ensuing months, Leo has tried to set aside time in his busy schedule to play the sport every week as part of his Augustinian devotion to physical activity and spirituality.

The Rule of Augustine, an ancient guide for religious life, highlights the value of good habits.

"He's trying to keep some regularity to his routine that comes from the Rule," said Fr. Rob Hagan, prior of the Augustinian Province of St. Thomas of Villanova and team chaplain for the men's basketball and football teams at Villanova University — the pope's alma mater in Pennsylvania.

Leo's devotion to St. Augustine was evident when he made a pilgrimage during his Africa trip in April to the archaeological ruins in Algeria where the influential fifth century theologian and philosopher lived and died and wrote some of the most important works in Western thought.

The pope "highlights a very underappreciated Augustinian value — especially in this noisy world — and that is to develop your interior life," Hagan added in an interview with The Associated Press.

Leo likes to spend Mondays and Tuesdays at the papal retreat in Castel Gandolfo in the hills outside Rome — where he plays tennis with his secretary, Msgr. Edgard Iván Rimaycuna Inga, and goes swimming and horseback riding, too.

Before becoming pope, then-Cardinal Robert Prevost talked about his tennis skills in an interview with the Augustinian Order.

"I consider myself quite the amateur tennis player," he said in the 2023 interview after taking over the Vatican's powerful Dicastery for Bishops following years as a missionary in Peru.

"Since leaving Peru I have had few occasions to practice so I am looking forward to getting back on the court," he added.

And on June 2, Leo released a video message to promote the values of sports as an instrument of peace and dialogue between cultures and nations — and also for "personal improvement," according to the Vatican.

"In life, as in the game, no one is saved alone," Leo said. "We need others to grow, to learn respect, to overcome our limits, and to celebrate together the victories we achieve. We ask that sport may always be a school of fraternity, not of empty rivalry, a space of encounter, not exclusion."



Italy's top-ranked tennis player Jannik Sinner, left, shares a light moment with Pope Leo XIV during their meeting at the Vatican, May 14, 2025. (AP/Vatican Media)

Marin Cilic, a Croatian player who won the 2014 U.S. Open, said it was "amazing to hear that Pope Leo loves tennis."

"It's a beautiful game. You enjoy it especially when you are playing without pressure of time, without pressure of tournaments," Cilic, who comes from the Bosnian pilgrimage town of Medjugorje, said in an interview ahead of the French Open.

A mental game

Even without the pressure of a tournament, tennis is a very mental game. Staying focused and avoiding unforced errors is one of the keys to being successful.

"If your opponent is going to beat you, that's fine. But don't beat yourself — you know, the double-faults, the smash into the net. The play that really had nothing to do with your opponent but had to do with you," Hagan said. "That does take a certain mental discipline, an ability to create good habits."

Tennis also is a full-body sport that requires a high level of hand-eye coordination, cardiovascular exertion and stamina. And there's a social aspect.

It's the perfect preparation to enable the 70-year-old Leo to carry out his day job of presiding over prayer services to thousands of faithful, constant greetings in public and private audiences, and draining papal trips around the globe.

In April, Leo traveled more than 11,000 miles on 18 flights for an 11-day tour of Africa.

"Just look at his schedule. Look at the pace that he is keeping," Hagan said. "He can sing the Mass parts because he has a lung capacity. Hear him because he has a certain strength in his voice. It's something that they don't teach you in the seminary: To be a priest, to be a spiritual or really any leader for that matter, it is a physically demanding job."

Before becoming pope, he would also work out at the Vatican-area Omega gym two to three times a week, with hourlong sessions focusing especially on posture and cardiovascular health, according to his personal trainer at the time. Prevost's workouts, described as suitable for a man in his 50s, would last up to an hour and focus especially on the treadmill and exercise bike, trainer Valerio Masella told the AP last year.

Augustinian values

Hagan noted that because of Leo, "people are discovering who St. Augustine is. People are discovering who the Augustinians are.

"And people are discovering and hopefully applying these Augustinian values. We don't have a monopoly on these values, but certainly Augustine and now Leo are putting them up on a platform that people can see," added Hagan, who has preached Augustinian values to Villanova teams for more than two decades — including two national championship basketball teams.

"It doesn't mean you're going to win every game," he said. "It doesn't mean you're going to win every tennis match. But what we're trying to be is the best version of ourselves — mind, body, soul and spirit. St. Augustine says, 'Do not be content with what you are if you want to become what you are not yet. For where you've grown pleased with yourself, there you shall remain.' "

Associated Press writer Nicole Winfield in Vatican City contributed to this report.

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