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Pope Leo XIV smiles as he arrives at Rome's Gemelli Hospital Oct. 13, 2026, ahead of his surg

Pope Leo XIV smiles as he arrives at Rome's Gemelli Hospital Oct. 13, 2026, ahead of his surgery that afternoon to remove a lung nodule. (OSV News/Reuters/Guglielmo Mangiapane)



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Pope Leo XIV's announcement of a growth in his lung and impending operation came as a shock to the world which has followed his 17-month pontificate, but many in the Roman Curia said they were reassured by the calm with which the pope shared the news.

For Augustinian Fr. Arthur Purcaro, who served as a missionary in Peru with a young Fr. Robert Prevost in the '80s, the pope's face told a different story.

"I believe he knew that this was much more than something minor," he told National Catholic Reporter during an interview in Rome.

Leo, 71, told pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square following his customary Sunday prayer there Oct. 11 that doctors had found the lung nodule "at a very early stage" and that it was "well-localized."

After the pope underwent surgery Oct. 13 at Rome's Gemelli hospital, the Vatican announced that doctors had found a malignant tumor in his right lung and removed its lower lobe. Doctors said the operation proceeded with no complications and that Leo is recovering well. He was released from the hospital Oct. 17, though what, if any, further treatment he will need is unclear as more test results are needed to determine the stage of the pope's cancer and how far it had spread before the operation.

Yet Purcaro, who also worked with Prevost in Rome for six years when the future pope was responsible for leading the worldwide Augustinian religious order, said he does not foresee any change in the methodical nature with which Leo has assembled his team in the Vatican and sought to implement his vision of the church.



Augustinian Fr. Arturo Purcaro, a longtime friend and collaborator of Pope Leo XIV, is pictured during an interview with the National Catholic Reporter at Villanova University in October 2025. (NCR photo/Justin McLellan)

"I hope we'll see a little bit of a slowing down in the pace, but other than that, I'll be surprised if there were any change in the velocity of the change in personnel" around the Vatican, Purcaro said.

The following interview transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

***NCR*: You watched the pope make the surprise announcement of his impending lung operation in St. Peter's Square last Sunday. What were your impressions of that moment?**

Purcaro: This was significant for him. I could see it on his face, I heard it in his words. He had written (to me) that he was going to announce it after the Angelus. It was more serious than it seemed to have let on through that Angelus announcement. His face told me a lot. There's his face when he walked out on the loggia May 8th (the day of his election) — joy, filled with the Holy Spirit, the challenge — and now, here it is for the Angelus, and he was greeting everybody as he does, you know, "happy Sunday," but there wasn't the joy, the inner joy was not coming up. So, from then I believe he knew that this was much more than something minor.

I think he was concerned, he wanted to give as strong a face as he could. He wanted to show he's human. He didn't have to say anything, did he? But he did, he chose to let people know.

There is speculation that the pope had an idea about his diagnosis when he went to Lourdes, a shrine associated with miraculous medical healings. Do you know if he brought a special intention there?

Pope Leo XIV prays before the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes at the Grotto of the Apparitions a

Pope Leo XIV prays before the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes at the Grotto of the Apparitions at Massabielle at the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in Lourdes, France, Sept. 26, 2026. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Certainly he had exams before that. I remember in July, he was talking about just the normal checkup … he didn't make anything of it. Since then, I thought maybe he was saying that he's getting these exams (to check for cancer).

But certainly he was very moved in Lourdes. He was overpowered by the number of people in Paris, but the significant moment of the journey was Lourdes for him. You can see the emotion on his face, hear it in his voice, and I spoke to him and asked him about it, and these were the two moments in that he was perhaps overpowered.

But there wasn't a special intention about this potential diagnosis.

I certainly don't know.

When the cardinals elected a relatively young and sporty pope, the world thought there would be no papal health scares at least for a while. Now this diagnosis injects a sense of fragility into what certainly may still be a long pontificate. As someone who knows the pope's personality and spirituality, how do you think he would carry something like this diagnosis forward?

I don't know Bob Prevost to have been ever denying of his humanity, (of acknowledging that) we need one another, we need God. And so this will just be another opportunity for him to demonstrate his faith, (to say) "I can't do what I like to do; I can't do what I used to do. I'm limited and I need your prayers." You hear him say that all the time.

There's a close connection with the Blessed Virgin. And so I think that prepares him. He knows that God is loving, that God is close, and that no matter what happens from here on out, that will be emphasized by him.

Pope Leo XIV greets Augustinian Fr. Alejandro Moral Antón, who served as prior general of the

Pope Leo XIV greets Augustinian Fr. Alejandro Moral Antón, who served as prior general of the order 2013 to 2025, during a visit Sept. 15, 2025, to the Augustinianum Patristic Institute in Rome to meet with members of the Augustinian general chapter. (CNS/Vatican Media)

As someone that has worked with the pope as an administrator and knows his decision-making process, do you think this diagnosis could make him speed up the pace in implementing his agenda or assembling his team in the Vatican? Until now that has been done very steadily and methodically.

I don't think that's a trait that Prevost has. He's methodical, as you say. He's patient. He trusts in God. He may have to prioritize (certain things), but I don't see him rushing to push through a team of people right now, or saying "this topic has to be primary." I think he feels called and inspired to do what he's doing. I hope we'll see a little bit of a slowing down in the pace, but other than that, I'll be surprised if there were any change in the velocity of the change in personnel (in the Vatican).

So you don't foresee any change in the pontificate as a result of the diagnosis?

Maybe the how to, but not the what. He knows what he's called to do and how to do it. He's obviously developed from (his election on) May 8th to now. It's not the same. He's got enthusiasm. He knows the mission that we are called to. He knows he's been called to announce the Gospel. He's not called to promote division. Peace is the first word out of his mouth (as pope), that's what he is going to propose.

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So if he becomes less active than he has been in many ways, if that happens, the actions will be decisive, there will be things that he has thought of. "I have to choose. I have to prioritize; I can't do everything." And that has happened in the past. So much happened during his time in Trujillo (in Peru), the Sendero Luminoso (terrorist group), terrorism. "What can we do? What should we do?" It was not an easy moment. And then he would step back and put it before God, talk about it in the community.

Do you think that in light of this diagnosis the world could see a different side of the pope?

Part of what I've seen already at this time as pope, and many people do not see it, is behind the scenes.

So at the Angelus at Castel Gandolfo, he's there very, very close to the people, and he'll go around and then he steps back into the palace. But who is there in the palace? Seated there by either Sant'Egidio or other workers, people who have special needs and (need) special help, (Leo will) stop and take time with each one of them. I think that part of his personality will be seen more.

You have seen it at Lourdes. How he took time with the people there, it was certainly very impressive. You notice it in the big audiences, how he has a special attention for children and for infants, but also when there's a special (needs) person, so (Leo will emphasize) that we are wounded. We are in need and we're in need of God, in need of comfort.

Any other thoughts on how an Augustinian would deal with this kind of news?

Certainly not alone. That's the Augustinian way. You share a community, you share with those around you, certainly you go to God in prayer. And by saying that, the Augustinian way of prayer is praying in community. (Leo) has special devotion to the Virgin, so the rosary is of (significance), importance for him. I imagine we might be hearing a little bit more of that emphasis, but it's not new, it's simply a change of emphasis.

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