

Welcome Pope Leo XIV

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On 8 May, with the first wisps of white smoke from the Sistine Chapel, a feeling of anticipation rippled around the Vatican. Who would be our new pope? In the hour or so that followed, tens of thousands of additional spectators rushed to St Peter's Square. At the same time, the announcement *habemus papam* made its way around the globe, pretty much as it happened. That evening, the eyes of the world turned toward the loggia of St Peter's.

Few people recognised the name Robert Prevost. Yet the speed with which the cardinals chose the new pope suggests that there was considerable support for his election, even prior to the conclave. Pope Leo XIV appeared to be awestruck as he stepped onto the balcony of the Vatican basilica. It seemed as if the whole Catholic world was present at that moment.

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As he stood there, did his thoughts turn to his childhood years, during the 1960s, growing up in a working-class suburb of Chicago? The parish church where he served Mass as an altar-boy is now an empty shell, an emblem of the decline in religious practice in the developed world. In the media frenzy surrounding his nomination, family members, schoolmates and even a surviving elementary-school teacher all described an intelligent and kind-natured boy who aspired to the priesthood from a young age.

In 1977, Robert Prevost joined the Augustinians and, following ordination (1982), was appointed to their mission in Peru. There he became acquainted with Gustavo Gutierrez, the leading proponent of liberation theology. Its pastoral concern for the poor, coupled with a determination to address the causes of poverty (and not just its symptoms), appealed to the quietly spoken Augustinian friar. His concern for social justice would continue to develop, much later, in his ministry as bishop of Chiclayo (2015–2023). As Bishop Prevost, he keenly applied the principles of the 2013 encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, especially as they related to the preservation of the Peruvian Amazon.

Traditionalists within the Church are critical of liberation theology and are often less than enthusiastic about



Pope Leo XIV holds an audience with journalists

Laudato Si. Such criticism, however, can hardly be levelled against Pope Leo XIV. His ministry has consistently been lived out within the framework of the institutional Church. His post-graduate study (during the 1980s) was in the field of canon law. This is the subject he would later teach, together with moral theology and Patristics (the study of early Christianity), to seminarians in Peru. In 1999, he was elected leader of the Chicago regional province of the Augustinians, and two years later, prior general of the Augustinian Order worldwide. In that capacity, he made several visits to Ireland, including in 2005, to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the first Augustinian foundation in Ireland.

It is said that God gives the Church the pope that is needed for its present time. The warmth and paternal manner of Pope Francis helped to restore the credibility of the Church following the

clergy abuse scandals. The ministry of Pope Leo XIV may well be in the style of a ‘thin pope’ who will speak less to the wider world and instead rely on the machinery of the Church, including the College of Cardinals and the local conferences of bishops, to promote the Gospel.

The choice of name, ‘Leo’, evokes the memory of two particularly effective predecessors: the first Pope Leo (391–461), a crucial figure at the Council of Chalcedon, preserved the unity of the Church at a time when it was in danger of fragmentation. Leo XIII (1810–1903), on the other hand, was known as an innovator, especially in the sphere of Catholic Social Teaching.

The new Pope Leo appeals to both traditionalists and progressives in the Church. He is a unifying figure. Brothers and sisters living in harmony (Ps 133:1) is a value of considerable importance in our divided world.