

# The 2025 Conclave

An extract from Brian Heffernan's new biography, *Leo XIV: An Augustinian Life in Context*, available from Messenger Publications.

Robert Prevost was not one of the most prominent *papabili*, although he did appear on some journalists' lists. When Bergoglio was elected in 2013, this was in part due to a speech he gave during the pre-conclave, about the Church that had to be freed of its self-containment. It was an address that captured the prevailing mood so accurately that he suddenly emerged as a credible candidate (although he had been that in 2005 too). Not so with Prevost: his speech to the cardinals left no lasting impression. But even in the first ballot, on the evening of 7 May, Prevost received many votes, more than Parolin according to some sources. This indicates that a group had formed around his candidacy even before the conclave had started, probably including many Latin American and North American cardinals, but others too. The archbishops of New York and Munich-Freising, Cardinals Timothy Dolan and Reinhard Marx, possibly played a role in this.

Towards midday on 8 May, all indications were that Prevost would be pope; during the lunch break he sat down to write his speech for later, on the loggia of St Peter's Basilica. That afternoon, in the fourth ballot, Prevost received the required two-thirds majority of 89 votes, and rumour has it that his tally far exceeded that

number.

The American-Peruvian cardinal was certainly an ideal candidate in one respect: he seemed to embody so many disparate faces of Catholicism at once without, however, making any concessions with regard to unity: from CTU to the Angelicum, from an Opus Dei seminary to synodality, from humble chapels in the sierra peruana to historic churches in Rome, from missionary to a cardinal of the curia. Where others who associate themselves with one particular context within Catholicism often look with suspicion or contempt at other contexts, Prevost seemed to traverse them all, identifying himself with all without distancing himself from anyone, like Paul 'all things to all men' (1 Cor 9:22). Like every quality, however, this characteristic also has a flip side, for what conciliator can simultaneously be a prophet? But this may have been precisely what the cardinals wanted after the pontificate of Francis.

In this book, I have sought to outline the successive contexts in which Robert Prevost lived and worked. He grew up in a Catholicism in Chicago that faced existential challenges. The Order with which Prevost was associated from an early age had to rise to this challenge and did so in various ways. One was to focus on the new



**Pope Leo XIV presides over the eucharistic celebration for the dead at the entrance to the Verano Cemetery**

Catholic population that was moving into the Augustinian parishes: immigrants from Latin America. Another was to participate in community organisation and community building. As he has shown, both aspects have left deep traces in Prevost's life and consciousness.

Prevost's active life can be divided into two periods: up to 2013, the Augustinian Order was his field of work, and after 2014 it was the ministry of bishop, first locally and then globally. The Order that he envisioned as an Augustinian sought to form communities of brothers who live from prayer and who place themselves at the service of the Church and society. And the Church that Prevost envisioned in Peru and in Rome, proclaimed the

Gospel with joy, consisted of warm communities of committed believers, was close to the poor and was unafraid to criticise injustices in their name.

There is a thread that runs through his teaching: the institutional aspect of the Church is not its most important feature: 'There are institutional dimensions, but that is not the heart of what the Church should be.' For Prevost, the core is the experience of 'the beauty and joy of knowing Jesus' – the 'primacy of Christ' – an experience lived together with friends, the fellow members of the Christian community. This Augustinian consciousness is likely to become a major thread running through Leo XIV's pontificate.