

Annuncio vobis gaudium magnum. Habemus papam

(“I announce to you great joy. We have a pope”)

These are the words that Cardinal Proto-Deacon, the Frenchman Dominique Mamberti, used when he announced from the balcony of Saint Peter’s basilica that Robert Francis Prevost, Cardinal Bishop of Albano, had been elected pope taking the style (name) Leo XIV.



Leo PP. XIV

Who is Leo XIV?

Born Robert Francis Prevost on September 14, 1955 in the south-side, middle class, Chicago suburb of Dolton, he is the third son of Louis Prevost, a US navy veteran of French/Italian heritage and Mildred Agnes Prevost, a Chicago-born, mixed-race woman from a Creole family originating in Louisiana.

Both his parents were educators and committed, practising Catholics. At age 14 he entered the high school seminary of the Augustinian order in Saugatuck, Michigan, near Grand Rapids; in a way this separated him from his family, but gave him a good secondary education.

Who are the Augustinians? Proper name: the Order of the Hermits of Saint Augustine, a medieval mendicant order linked spiritually to Saint Augustine (+430) by following the rule of life he developed. They grew out of groups of dedicated men who followed his Rule and who were brought together in a religious order by Pope Innocent IV in 1243. They serve in the active ministry while maintaining community life and prayer. Martin Luther was an Augustinian. Nowadays they number about 2800 members worldwide, with 37 members in the Australian province spread across schools and parishes in NSW, Queensland and Victoria.

Studying at the Augustinian Villanova University near Philadelphia, Prevost earned a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics in 1977. He worked part time as a cemetery groundsman while studying at Villanova. He formally joined the Augustinian order in September 1977 and made his solemn profession in 1981. He completed a Master of Divinity (M.Div) at Chicago's Catholic Theological Union in 1982, was ordained a priest in Rome by Archbishop Jean Jadot in June, 1982. He completed a Licentiate and then Doctorate of Canon Law (JCD) at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas, Rome, learning Italian while there.

In 1985-1986 he spent a brief stint in Peru where the US Augustinians maintain missions. He then returned to the US, going back to Peru in 1988 and remained there for ten years as rector of the Augustinian seminary in Trujillo, a coastal town in north-central Peru. This was during the Presidency of Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), who became de facto dictator of Peru in 1992 supported by the military. Prevost was openly critical of Fujimori and of army violence, as well as political corruption. This was also the period of the anti-government Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group, Shining Path, who were also violent. The key thing is that he lived as a missionary in a country essentially caught-up in civil war and he experienced all of the dangers and difficulties that went with that reality.

In 1998 he returned to the US when he was elected Prior Provincial of his province, and in 2001 he was elected Prior General of the Augustinians, moving to Rome. He remained in office for two six-year terms until 2013. This meant that he travelled widely visiting the 2800 Augustinians spread across the world, including several visits to Australia.

After completing his second term as General, he returned briefly to Chicago and then in November, 2014 Pope Francis appointed him Apostolic Administrator and then Bishop of Chiclayo in coastal northern Peru. He became a Peruvian citizen before becoming bishop. He remained as Bishop of Chiclayo until January 2023. This was when Pope Francis brought him back to Rome to become Prefect of the important Dicastery for Bishops. In September 2023 Francis made Prevost a Cardinal Deacon, promoting him to Cardinal Bishop of Albano on February 6, 2025.

At the Bishops Dicastery he succeeded the French-Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet. This is the department of the Roman Curia (formally called the Consistorial Congregation) that oversees all matters concerning dioceses and bishops, except for missionary areas that are subject to the Evangelization Dicastery. The Bishops' Dicastery's most important task is the appointment of bishops, as well as disciplining them and even sacking them.

If Australian appointments are anything to go by, in the brief time he was at Bishops, Prevost was committed to appointing pastoral and intelligent priests to the episcopate. He also had to tackle the difficult task of the dismissal of the bishop of the north-eastern Texas diocese of Tyler, Joseph Strickland, after an Apostolic Visitation to the diocese. Strickland's attacks on the integrity and orthodoxy of Pope Francis were becoming notorious.

The Papal Election (2025)

Pope Francis died on April 21, 2025, triggering a conclave to elect his successor. This conclave was by far the most international ever held. Francis had appointed cardinals from all over the world, mainly from developing countries that had never been represented before in papal elections. Many commentators felt that these cardinals from the periphery would be naïve and not grasp the intricacies of papal and curial politics; most of the peripherals were younger than cardinals in previous conclaves with an average age in the mid-sixties. It's also significant that several ancient and prominent dioceses that have a long tradition of cardinal-archbishops were not represented in the 2005 conclave. The stand-outs were Milan and Venice. Also, many large archdioceses like Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Sydney which usually have cardinals, were unrepresented.

There were four cardinals from our Pacific region in the 2025 conclave. They were Cardinals Wilfred Dew (retired Archbishop of Wellington, New Zealand), John Ribat, MSC (Archbishop of Port Moresby, Papua-New Guinea), Soane Patita Pani Mali (Bishop of Tonga), and at 45 the youngest member of the College of Cardinals, Mykola Bychok, Bishop of Saints Peter and Paul of Melbourne for Ukrainian Catholics.

As it turned out the peripheral cardinals were much better informed and ecclesiastically astute than the "experts" had predicted. They elected Robert Prevost on the second day of the conclave. The strong view (repeated by Prevost himself) before the conclave was that no US citizen would be elected. The difference for Prevost was that he was also a Peruvian citizen and, in a surprising quick election, he was elected on the fourth ballot on the second day of the conclave in late-afternoon of May 8, 2025.

He chose the papal style "Leo" clearly harking back to Leo XIII elected in 1878 who, after a long and distinguished papacy, died in 1903. In the cultural world of the industrial revolution, Pope Leo XIII was a champion of the rights of workers in the capitalist system. His most famous encyclical was *Rerum Novarum* (1891) which upheld private property against extreme socialism and communism, but insisted on just wages, workers' rights and trade unions. Leo XIII was a pope who looked outward to the world beyond the church. He clearly sets a theme for the papacy of Leo XIV. For the present pope world peace is clearly a priority as he made clear in his first speech from the loggia of Saint Peter's Basilica. At a deeper level and he understands that we increasingly face a cultural context in which artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics will dominate which, he says, "pose new challenges for the defence of human dignity, justice and labor."

What will Leo XIV do?

It's clear the Leo XIV is cautious and thinks before he speaks. He won't talk off the cuff and deliver memorable quotations like Pope Francis.

“Who am I to judge?” Francis’ image of the church as a “field hospital” and his attacks on clericalism as a “disease”. He also urged us not to “lose pastoral charity which should permeate all our decisions and attitudes and avoid being “judges who only deny, reject and exclude.”

However, Pope Leo will maintain the main agenda of his predecessor; he is no a closet reactionary. Australian Journalist Rob Harris is right when he says (*The Age*, 9 May 2025) that Leo XIV is “a unifying figure. His international experience and quiet diplomacy allowed him to navigate the ideological and regional divides among the cardinals. His election may mark a stylistic shift from Francis’ more outspoken leadership, but not necessarily a reversal of his reforms.” That’s exactly right!

Leo comes with an extraordinarily wide pastoral experience and a considerable background in church administration as both the general of an international religious order, as bishop in Peru and from his time in curial administration at the Bishops Dicastery. This means that he knows at the base level the real issues facing the church.

While he won't reverse the emphases of Pope Francis, his papacy is already beginning to look stylistically different to that of Francis, perhaps most clearly symbolized by his return to the papal apartments in the Apostolic Palace from Francis’ choice to live in an apartment in the Casa Santa Marta. Leo has also chosen to wear the red satin mozzetta, although he has abandoned the ermine lining, favoured by Benedict XVI.

Another significant change is that he is a born English-speaker. The first pope to speak English (actually Middle English) was Nicholas Breakspear, Pope Hadrian IV (1154-1159), born at Abbot’s Langley near St Albans in southern England. This means that Leo XIV naturally speaks the actual *lingua franca* of the international world – English. He also speaks fluent Spanish, Catholicism’s other world language. Commenting on this Vatican expert, Robert Mickens says that Leo “must prioritise using these two languages” (UCA News, July 4, 2025). Besides English, Spanish and almost flawless Italian, he also speaks French and Portuguese and some German.

He is also committed to harmonious relations with the other churches, praying at his inauguration as Bishop of Rome for “our sister Christian Churches”, praying for “a united church, a sign of unity and communion which becomes a leaven for a reconciled world.” He is very likely to attend in November 2025 the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea (325AD), the gathering of bishops summoned by the Emperor Constantine to confront the Arian crisis. Nicaea is now Iznik in Turkey and is about 150 kilometres from Istanbul.

The issues confronting Leo XIV

In a way Pope Leo outlined his agenda in the sermon at his inaugural Mass.

He said: “In this our time, we still see too much discord, too many wounds caused by hatred, violence, prejudice, the fear of difference, and an economic paradigm that exploits the Earth’s resources and marginalises the poorest. For our part, we want to be a small leaven of unity, communion and fraternity within the world. We want to say to the world, with humility and joy: Look to Christ! Come closer to him! Welcome his word that enlightens and consoles! Listen to his offer of love and become his one family: *in the one Christ, we are one*. This is the path to follow together, among ourselves but also with our sister Christian churches, with those who follow other religious paths, with those who are searching for God, with all women and men of good will, in order to build a new world where peace reigns!”

This is an excellent summary of what his papacy will be all about.

Some commentators have argued that the cardinals might also have intended to elect an American citizen as pope as a counter-weight to Donald Trump. There may be some grounds to argue this, although Leo himself sketched a wider picture. At a Rome conference the pope spoke of “the dramatic nature of our age, marked by wars, climate change, growing inequalities, forced and contested migration, stigmatised poverty, disruptive technological innovations, job insecurity and precarious labor rights.” In so far as Trump’s nationalism is a part response to globalised neo-capitalism’s marginalization of working people, Leo may have some sympathy, but he would certainly oppose the MAGA notion of migrants as “invaders” and the failure to confront the need to co-operate to prevent environmental and a global warming catastrophe.

He will maintain the Catholic position of the dignity of every person, no matter where they come from, and of the need to build an accepting human community that embrace all with a sense of justice and equity.

Clearly, environmental issues are going to be central for him as they were for Pope Francis. In early July 2025 as bushfires raged in parts of Europe which was undergoing scorching summer heat, Leo XIV said: “Today ... we live in a world that is burning, both because of global warming and armed conflicts.” This marked the Vatican’s second significant appeal on global warming within a week. He was blunt in his July 2025 message for the church’s annual day of prayer for creation. He condemned the “injustice, violations of international law and the rights of peoples, grave inequalities and the greed that fuels them are spawning deforestation, pollution and the loss of biodiversity. He was also unequivocal that we are to blame: “Climate change [is] provoked by human activity.” He added: “As yet, we seem incapable of recognising that the destruction of nature does not affect everyone in the same way. When justice and peace are trampled underfoot, those who are most hurt are the poor, the marginalised and the excluded.”

He is also committed to world peace. In his first public words from the loggia of Saint Peter’s after his election he said: “To all people wherever you may be, to all nations, to the whole earth: peace be with you. This is the peace of the Risen Christ: a disarmed peace, a disarming peace, humble and persevering, it comes from God, God who loves us all unconditionally.”

Internal church issues

Leo XIV also faces some serious internal church issues. First, he has reappointed all Vatican dicastery prefects. This means he working with the Francis old guard. But he also has to replace himself at the Bishops Dicastery and to decide if Cardinal Pietro Parolin, present Secretary of State, will continue in that office. No doubt he will eventually make changes to the Vatican curia.

He has made it clear that he intends to continue Pope Francis' reforms to church governance including the emphasis on synodal processes and the shift away from monarchical, absolute rule. This seems to fit in with Leo's own more shy personality. He is a thoughtful man; as Christopher White from the *National Catholic Reporter* says he speaks "with caution and great deliberation" (May 9, 2025).

He has also got two problematic personnel cases to confront: first, the future of Cardinal Angelo Becciu whose conviction for financial crimes stemming from the bungled €350 million (US\$412 million) investment in a Knightsbridge, London property, is being appealed. As an experienced canon lawyer he won't interfere in this, but he still faces what to do with Becciu after the appeal.

He also confronts unresolved sexual abuse cases, particularly that of the expelled former Jesuit and mosaic artist, Rev. Marko Rupnik, who is credibly accused of abusing adult women. Leo has already appointed French Archbishop Thibault Verny to head the Vatican's child protection advisory board, replacing the retiring Archbishop of Boston, Cardinal Sean O'Malley, a good appointment.

An immediate issue facing the pope is finance.

The Vatican is running a structural deficit of between US\$59 (€50,200,000) and US\$79 million (€67,262,000), and a fall in the pension fund of US\$1.18 billion (€866,700,000) caused largely by an increased life-span of Italians.

The deficit is caused by the cost of running the dicasteries and the 117 papal nunciatures (embassies) in many overseas countries. Another problem is the decrease in donations from wealthy conservative US Catholics in opposition to Pope Francis, and developed world Catholics generally to Peter's Pence, the annual collection for Holy See. One source of income would be the sale of Vatican- owned property in Rome and Italy (where rents are fixed by law) and in Paris, London, Geneva and Lausanne. About 70% of these produce no income because they house Vatican or other church offices. But there is deep reluctance to sell property by the Vatican, even money losing properties, although they sold the Japan nunciature located near the imperial palace in Tokyo.

Another issue he faces is the alienation of the Latin Mass traditionalists that focuses on Pope Francis restriction on the use of the old Latin Mass which Benedict XVI in 2007 had allowed. Francis argued that this liturgy had created divisions in the church. It was also seen as a symbol of the rejection of Vatican Council II. The traditionalists hope that, in the words of their figurehead, US Cardinal Raymond Burke, that Pope Leo "will take up the study of this question and try to restore the situation as it was." While Burke is optimistic, the solution remains to be seen.

The mention of Burke reminds us that Leo XIV's own birth country, the United States, remains a problem. The US church is deeply divided with a bishops' conference that could easily be a branch of the Republican Party. Estimate of 59% of US Catholics voting for Trump, including one of Pope Leo's own brothers, is another sign of a church in trouble. As Robert Mickens says "the nearly 275 active members of the USCCB (bishops' conference) were notorious for their opposition to Pope Francis. They were, at best, lukewarm towards his reforms and priorities, and at worst, they outright resisted them" (UCA News, June 6, 2025).

Certainly, there are clear signs are that Pope Leo is not going to retreat from Pope Francis' emphases. His environmental messages make that clear and three of his first four episcopal appointments in the US are of immigrants. One of the key appointments will be New York where the Trump-leaning Cardinal Timothy Dolan has reached the retirement age of 75. However, the US church is going to be a problem for Pope Leo. Perhaps his best bet is to continue what he has apparently begun, the appointment of more genuinely Catholic bishops.

In conclusion

So, in these early days of his papacy what can we expect from Pope Leo XIV? Certainly, the continuation of the reforms and emphases of Pope Francis. He will continue along the Francis path, but in a more low-key, thoughtful and deliberative way. In an ironic sense, because of his more low-key approach he may well be much more successful in advancing the Francis agenda. Leo is an exceptionally skilled and experienced church administrator with years of international experience.

Fundamentally, Leo sees the church as a place where divisions are broken down and borders between people are opened and the barriers between class and race are broken down. In his 2025 Pentecost sermon he said that the Holy Spirit "breaks down barriers and tears down the walls of indifference and hatred." He is a true pontiff, a bridge builder whose light is the risen Christ.