

Leo XIV, a Missionary Pope for a Global Church

A former missionary and global Church leader, Pope Leo XIV brings pastoral wisdom, cross-cultural experience and a unifying vision to a polarized world as he begins a historic papacy.



Newly elected Pope Leo XIV, Robert Prevost appears at the main central loggia balcony of the St. Peter's Basilica for the first time, after the cardinals ended the conclave, in the Vatican, May 9, 2025.

Cardinal Robert Prevost, a 69-year-old American, was elected pope at 6:08 p.m. on Thursday, May 8, 2025. A member of the Order of Saint Augustine and a longtime missionary in Peru, Prevost was appointed in 2023 by Pope Francis to lead the Vatican's powerful office that oversees bishops. His election signals the cardinals' clear support for a Church that is open, multicultural and missionary in spirit.

Born in the United States, Robert Prevost comes from a Franco-Italian father and a Spanish mother. His own life story, shaped by missionary service in Peru and global leadership in his religious order, reflects the multicultural church that Pope Francis has long championed. The cardinals, gathered in conclave, chose him as the 267th successor to St. Peter.

A relatively recent arrival in Rome - he was made a cardinal in September 2023 - Prevost was not considered a frontrunner by Vatican watchers. Known for his discretion, he avoided media attention during the conclave period by using a small, nondescript car to

travel the short distance between the Augustinian curia, where he lived, and the Synod Hall, where the cardinals met.

Since taking charge of the Dicastery for Bishops in April 2023, Prevost has had a hand in most episcopal appointments around the world. A gifted linguist, he speaks English, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, and reads Latin and German. He brings to the papacy one of the most expansive and pastoral perspectives within the Roman Curia, shaped by decades of diverse experience.

Missionary Roots in Peru

Born in Chicago in 1955, Robert Francis Prevost entered the Augustinian order in 1977. He studied mathematics and philosophy at Villanova University near Philadelphia, then theology at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, followed by canon law at the Angelicum in Rome.

Ordained a priest in 1982 in Rome by Belgian Archbishop Jean Jadot - himself a former nuncio to the United States and a prominent progressive voice during the papacies of Paul VI and John Paul II - Prevost was sent to Peru in 1985 as a missionary in the Chulucanas prelate in the Andes. He completed his doctorate in canon law in 1986 with a dissertation on the role of local priors in his order.

Returning to Chicago in 1988 to head vocations and missions for the Midwest province of the Augustinians, he went back to Peru the following year. He settled in Trujillo, a major city in the north, where he spent nearly a decade forming young religious. Elected provincial of the Midwest in 1999, he served only two and a half years before being elected in 2001 as the order's prior general.

Bishop in a divided Peruvian Church

Prevost's 12-year tenure in Rome as prior general was marked by deep reflection and intercultural dialogue. *"Different people can deeply enrich our lives,"* he said in a 2023 interview. *"One of the greatest gifts I've received in life is being part of a community built on the ability to share what we're going through and remain open to others."*

In 2013, he returned to Chicago but was soon sent back to Peru as apostolic administrator, then bishop of Chiclayo, another Andean diocese near Chulucanas. The Peruvian Church was deeply divided at the time, and the Vatican preferred to name a foreign bishop to help restore unity.

Elected vice president of the Peruvian bishops' conference in 2018, Prevost became a key figure during the Sodalicio scandal, a major abuse case involving an ultra-conservative lay movement. Even after his return to Rome, he continued to follow the case closely, right up to Pope Francis's decision in January to dissolve the movement - one of the late pope's final actions. Prevost was also involved in the removal of Archbishop José Antonio Eguren of Piura, a Sodalicio member found complicit in the abuse scandal.

Sex Abuse accountability: 'He did more than most Latin American bishops'

His determined handling of the abuse crisis made him a target of retaliation. A Sodalicio member accused him of covering up abuse in Chiclayo, though both Peruvian courts and the Vatican's doctrinal office closed the case due to lack of evidence. *"They went after him in revenge,"* said journalist Paola Ugaz, whose investigation helped uncover the scandal. She called Prevost one of the few Peruvian bishops who stood by survivors.

"He took action, certainly more than most Latin American bishops," said Mexican sociologist Rodolfo Soriano-Núñez in *Our Sunday Visitor*, praising Prevost's preventive measures in Chiclayo.

"He is a man of faith, prudence, and deep love for the Church," said Sister Yvonne Reungoat, former superior general of the Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco and one of the first women named to the Dicastery for Bishops by Pope Francis. *"He has a strong sense of responsibility when it comes to discerning episcopal candidates and takes problematic situations seriously."*

A Listener, not an Ideologue

Despite his deep convictions, Prevost is wary of overemphasizing morality or doctrine. *"We often focus on teaching doctrine and how to live our faith, but we risk forgetting that our first mission is to teach what it means to know Jesus Christ and to witness to our closeness to the Lord,"* he told Vatican News in 2023. *"The first thing to communicate is the beauty of faith, the beauty and joy of knowing Jesus.."*

Prevost has also called for a shift in how the Church understands authority. *"We must stop hiding behind an outdated idea of authority,"* he said. *"We need to move from a model where authority speaks and everyone obeys, to an ecclesial experience that values the charisms, gifts and ministries present in the Church."*

"He's a calm man, a good listener who respects the voices of everyone in the dicastery," Reungoat said. *"He knows how to approach problems pragmatically,"* added another colleague.

Bridging Divides

Over the past two years in Rome, Cardinal Prevost has avoided ideological camps and cultivated good relationships across the spectrum. He played a role in easing tensions between the Vatican and the German Church over its Synodal Way.

"Divisions and polemics are useless in the Church," he said in a Vatican News interview. A true son of St. Augustine, he emphasized unity. *"That's a real challenge today, especially when polarization has become society's default mode—where instead of seeking unity as a core principle, we swing from one extreme to another,"* he told fellow Augustinians. He rejected confusing unity with uniformity or diversity with disorder.

"These are ideological positions," said the new pope. "When an ideology rules my life, I can no longer dialogue or engage with others because I've already decided how things must be. That makes it very difficult to be Church, to be community, to be brothers and sisters."

Milestones in the life of Pope Leo XIV

Sept. 14, 1955 - Born in Chicago, Illinois

1977 - Enters Augustinian novitiate; makes final vows Aug. 29, 1981

June 19, 1982 - Ordained a priest by Archbishop Jean Jadot

1985-1986 & 1989-1998 - Missionary in Peru

1999 - Elected provincial of the Midwest

2001-2013 - Prior general of the Augustinian order

2014 - Named apostolic administrator, then bishop of Chiclayo

2018 - Vice president of the Peruvian bishops' conference

2023 - Appointed prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops; made cardinal in September

2025 - Elected pope, taking the name Leo XIV

(Nicolas Seneze - Le Croix)

Séamus Ahearne OSA – Robert Prevost OSA, Pope Bob

Seamus Aherne, like Pope Leo, is a member of the Augustinian Order. Seamus was Parish Priest of St Joseph's, Broomhouse, in Edinburgh, for several years in the 1990's.

The phone rang. The White Smoke had appeared. I turned on the TV. My immediate assumption was that one of the more prominent characters would now be named as Pope. I was quietly pleased. There was a deep reluctance in me to let this happen or fall on Bob. I felt he was being mentioned too often in recent days.

When I heard Robert Francis Prevost being announced, I was saddened for him. This was too much. I had a very strange feeling which is quite ridiculous; that he is too good to be taken over by the enormity of this role. This was stupid on my part of course. I wanted even in prayer to protect him.

Bob is a gentleman. He is quiet. He is strong. He is reserved. He is very much one of us [ie an Augustinian Friar]. He comes to eat almost every day in St Monica's [The Augustinian Mother House] in Rome, which is just off St Peter's Square. He eats with the members of our Curia. He joins in Mass most days. He waits on the visitors who join the community.

He had studied for a time in Rome at St Monica's. He worked in Peru for years. He came for a General Chapter to Rome and was elected our General. He was General for twelve years. After that he went back to Chicago but was then named Bishop in Peru and returned to his mission. To be a Bishop, he had to be naturalised as a Peruvian citizen. He was called to Rome later by Francis and became the leader of those who work with appointing Bishops across the world and dealing with the many problems that arise. He used to meet with Pope Francis every Saturday morning early to discuss their shared business. And now Robert is Pope Leo.