

From a recent edition of **THE TABLET**: Pope Francis' biographer, Austen Ivereigh, reflects on who Pope Leo is, and the influences that have formed him....

Made in Peru

Will Pope Leo be a cautious consensus-builder or will he continue the Francis upheaval? The first biographer to draw on in-depth interviews with him may have the answer / **By AUSTEN IVEREIGH**

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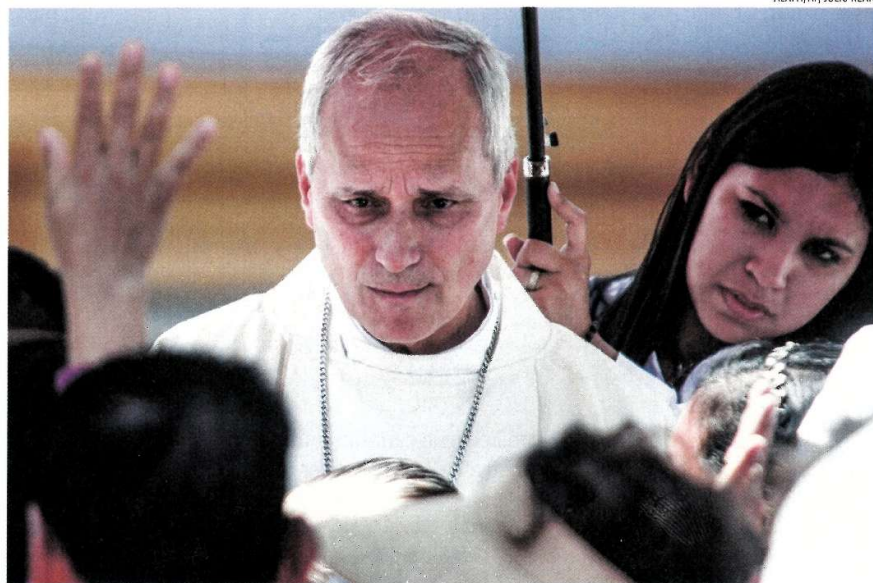
THOSE OF US waiting for the real Pope to emerge from beneath his “cautious, careful, and measured façade” might be in for surprise, the veteran Vatican journalist John Allen wrote recently on his Crux news site. For it is likely that “the cautious, careful and measured façade, in the end, *is* the real Pope”.

Moves that might appear to be tantalisingly discordant – receiving Fr James Martin SJ in the apostolic palace to affirm his ministry to gay people while inviting Cardinal Raymond Burke to celebrate the traditional Latin Mass in St Peter's Basilica, say – are not, in other words, an exercise in consensus-building prior to some dramatic reveal, but the papal programme itself: a leadership, in Allen's words, that emphasises balance, consideration for different points of view, and the belief that “what the Church needs right now, above all, is not further upheaval but a measure of peace”.

Is that right? Is it Leo's task to tamp down or halt what Francis upheaved? For answers, we need not look far: Allen's wife, Elise Ann Allen, also an American journalist and *Vaticanista*, this week publishes the first in-depth study of Leo XIV, drawing on his first sit-down interviews as Pope – the result of two meetings with him over the summer, one at Castel Gandolfo and one at the Vatican.

She goes back some years with Leo, having first interviewed the then Bishop of Chiclayo in December 2018 in Peru, and they seem to have hit it off. Robert Prevost was at the time also vice-president of the Peruvian bishops' conference and head of its safeguarding commission; Allen was doing one of her many in-depth reports on sex abuse cover-up in *El Sodalicio*, the notorious Peruvian lay movement she knew from the inside. Five years later, when Prevost, by now the prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, came for dinner at the Allens' flat in Prati, she was again struck by his openness, humour, simplicity and attentiveness to everyone around him.

She tells this story at the start of *León XIV: Ciudadano del mundo, misionero del siglo XXI* (“Leo XIV: Citizen of the world, missionary of the 21st century”), which was commissioned by the Peruvian branch of Penguin Random House, and is for now available only in Spanish, with translations expected early next year. The book's Peru focus is justified by Allen's research, which shows how deeply Leo was shaped by the country whose nationality he eventually adopted, by the people he missioned to, and by the tensions – political, social and ecclesial – in the Church



that he had to navigate. In those pressures and choices, the future Pope was born; without Peru, one might say, there would be no Leo. And it is fair to say, *pace* the other Allen, that the Leo born of Peru is indeed far more focused and decisive than the cautious, careful façade might lead you to believe.

For Prevost there is no searing childhood grief of an orphaned Karol Wojtyła, nor the trauma of a shy Joseph Ratzinger dragooned into the Hitler Youth, no sign, even, of something like the teenage Jorge Mario Bergoglio's mystical encounter in the confessional. Genetically, the Prevosts are an interracial riot, but in character they come across in Allen's telling as next-door folk: quiet, modest, unremarkable. The family home in suburban south Chicago is calm and tribally Catholic: parish school, weekly Mass, the Rosary, volunteering in church activities. Young Bob sings in the choir, is an altar boy, and everyone, including himself, sees him as singled out for priesthood.

HE ENTERS an Augustinian minor seminary, where he is bright, studious, kind, pious and *sportif*. We learn the reasons for his attraction to a missionary life (a desire to get out and serve the poor), and specifically to the Order of St Augustine (a love of the saint of Hippo, and its emphasis on education and community) which he enters after earning a bachelor's degree in mathematics at Villanova in 1977. But there is no existential crisis, no suffering or serious sin of the kind that marks a man

Pope Leo, as the then Bishop of Chiclayo, Robert Prevost, says Mass in Motupe, Peru in 2018

– nothing that backs him against a wall and reveals a lion's heart. Does nothing ever happen, or is no one saying? Maybe this is the miracle fruit of loving, stable families. Leo recalls to Allen a few evanescent doubts about whether to opt for marriage rather than the celibate life, and says he flirted with a life of politics rather than faith. But the road looks clear. He wants to be a missionary, but not as a lone ranger; he longs for a harmonious community life. The Augustinians offer both.

Even his time training with other Religious for a Master's in Divinity at the progressive Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in early 1980s Chicago – he is, *naturellement*, diligent, punctilious, and cheerful – leaves him oddly unaffected by the post-conciliar turmoil. Allen says he absorbed there the liturgical changes, the ecclesiology of the People of God, and so on. But in her telling Prevost sits lightly to the discussions on campus. Leo tells her the debates helped him “to be open to considering all aspects of the teaching of the Church”, but that “this doesn't mean that, as a priest, I would reject them”. Duty and obedience prevail.

Marked down now as clever and able, Prevost makes his solemn profession and is dispatched to the Augustinianum in Rome in 1981 to study canon law. He is ordained (1982), gets his licentiate, or JCL, from the Angelicum (1984) and later a doctorate, or JCD (1987), with a thesis on the role of the Augustinian

prior. Why law? Allen does not ask, but it figures. Law is concrete; it is practical. It's about good order, justice, rights, problem-solving.

There is much that is safe, cautious and conventional about Prevost at this time, a ream of touchpaper apparently safe from sparks. Worryingly for a 30-year-old cleric, he loves Rome, feels at home there, doesn't want to leave. But in 1985 – *Dios es bueno* – while still working on his doctorate, he is dispatched to Peru. And there, even though his basic character remains, the pastor in Prevost begins to come alive, along with a passion for a vision of the Church rooted in the Latin American reception of the Second Vatican Council.

He was set alight in that first year in Chulucanas, in northern Peru, the base of the mission that the Chicago Augustinians had taken on in the early 1960s, in one of the poorest and least developed areas in the country. They created a prelature under a bishop Leo describes as prophetic, John McNabb OSA.

At first Prevost was horrified. It was the apogee of Shining Path, the Maoist guerrilla movement notorious for its ferocious scorched-earth tactics and fundamentalist ideology; ordinary Peruvians, especially in rural areas, were caught in the crossfire of terrorism and the army's brutal counter-terrorist response. No one was spared the explosions, power cuts and gun battles, nor the hyper-inflation and economic meltdown. Foreigners – including missionaries – faced death threats and kidnappings. Prevost, arriving after floods had wrecked the roads, asked God what on earth he was doing there. The answer came in a bout of typhoid fever. He was rushed to a clinic, the only time in his life he has been in hospital. There his shell cracked, and from it life emerged. Prevost felt God telling him to get over it and get on with it. "I'm going to give it my all," he promised, and after that – he tells Allen – never looked back.

Bishop McNabb was the pioneer of a pastoral plan inspired by the avant-garde 1950s renewal initiative of an Italian Jesuit, Fr Riccardo Lombardi. Initially aimed at empowering animators in local settings to read the signs of the times and enable conversion, the Movement for a Better World – it's still going – developed in the 1970s a dynamic method of implementing the Second Vatican Council's People-of-God ecclesiology in parishes. Chulucanas was the first diocese in Latin America to adopt the New Image of the Parish, which sounds a lot like an 1980s version of the synodal, pastoral vision of the Francis era, even using the same language of participation, communion and mission. Prevost soaked it all up and put it into practice. "All that we are hearing about today in the talk about synodality," Leo tells Allen, "we were doing in the 1980s in Chulucanas."

That pastoral plan would become the model for Prevost over the next 20 years, as it was for the other Augustinian missionaries in northern Peru: to create parishes with strong

lay agency and participation. For McNabb, who had attended the final session of the Council, it was all about moving away from what Leo calls "an individualist spirituality and privatised piety in which I pray to God, go to Mass, and hope that God saves me" and about "us becoming an authentic ecclesial communion in order together to give witness to the presence of Christ in the world".

In this, says Leo, Latin America remains a beacon to the rest of the Church. He tells Allen "there are still parts of the Church that have not lived the renewal of Vatican II" and that it is time to ask why. In this, Leo sounds like other Latin American bishops, who often describe how the Church in Europe and North America lit the fuse of Vatican II but then retreated into the sacristy and the old clerical model, while Latin America, a bystander at the Council itself, went on to nurture its fire.

AFTER RETURNING to Rome to receive his JCD, in 1988 Prevost was sent back to Peru, this time to the city of Trujillo. He was given the task of building a formation house for local Augustinian vocations. Over the next 10 years he was also director of formation of the friars, and spiritual director to many, while

teaching at the diocesan seminary. He also acted as judge in the diocesan tribunal, handling mostly cases of abuse – by lay catechists and teachers as well as by priests. And on top of it all, he was also a parish priest.

Allen's many interviews with those who knew him at the time offer a portrait of a highly disciplined workaholic – awake at 4 a.m., in the chapel by 5, Eucharist at 6 – who says little but achieves much: an introvert doer, careful planner and problem-solver. He was demanding of those who worked with him or whom he was forming, ensuring they developed their inner lives – where Augustine believed we meet God – while working for good qualifications. At the same time, he was a pastor in the Latin American mould, teaching the Augustinians to be attentive to people's needs through what he called *acompañamiento solidario*, walking with the poor in solidarity with them.

This was not just about creating people's kitchens but defending human rights. The Latin American Church's meetings at Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) deeply influenced the friars' pastoral action in the parishes they ran – something not welcomed by many of the diocesan clergy in Trujillo, who sniffed at their commitment to the formation of lay people and empowerment of women. Their social activism brought death threats, and the Augustinian mother house in Chicago at one point urged them to pull out. But most of the friars chose to stay. (Leo was threatened by people claiming to be Shining Path *senderistas* but he refused a bodyguard.) It was hard work, but it paid off in vibrant communities that could "walk on their own two feet", as one of Allen's interviewees put it.

Elected prior of his Chicago-based province, Prevost headed back to the US in 1998, and three years later he was elected Prior General of the order worldwide, with its base in Rome.

If Peru broke him open as a pastor, and gave him a concrete expression of Church, his dozen years as Prior General gave him a global vision at a time when the OSA's vocations shrank in Europe and the US and grew in Africa and Asia. He learned how culture conditions viewpoint. "When you asked him something," recalls a friar, "he'd say, 'But you have to see that's not how it's seen in the Philippines, or in Asia, or Korea.'" He revamped the OSA's formation programmes and modernised the order's global communications, even doing a complete redesign of the OSA's website with the assistance of another friar, without help from technicians.

Leo describes his way of leading as "not primarily hierarchical". He gathers people and allows them to feel heard. "The truth belongs to everyone: it's not mine or yours, but is of all of us, and we have to seek it together," he tells Allen, quoting Augustine. But he is prepared to be decisive. "Some might say I'm bold, others might say crazy; but I'm prepared to go ahead."

Allen's witnesses show how his gentleness and calm demeanour conceal a steely resoluteness. When he learned of financial and sexual misconduct in the OSA's Mexican

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A pope in muddy boots standing in floodwaters in the Chiclayo Diocese in the aftermath of heavy rains in northwestern Peru in March 2023

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province, for example, he called together its leaders. They denied it all furiously, at which point Prevost put a briefcase on his desk, saying that in it he had the bank statements of a number of them. "So either we start to work on this, or I'll read them out, one by one. You decide: Shall we get to work?" Allen's source, who was there that day, was struck by Prevost's *modus operandi*: how a period of careful listening and evidence-gathering was followed by bold action. (In Mexico's case, the provincial and his allies were sacked.)

Francis, who had spotted Prevost's smarts long before he was Pope – they met in Buenos Aires in the early 2000s, when Bergoglio was its archbishop and Prevost was visiting his friars there – named him Bishop of Chiclayo after his term as Prior General ended in 2013. As well as leading a diocese he took on several roles in Peru's bishops' conference: its vice-president, head of its safeguarding and education commissions, and a member of its juridical and social action bodies, as well as of Caritas Peru.

Allen reveals why in 2020 Francis named Prevost apostolic administrator of the diocese of Callao, which neighbours Lima archdiocese: to deal with the fallout from its former (Spanish) bishop's attempt to impose the Neocatechumenal Way on every parish, to the point of sending round heavies with guns to threaten reluctant parish priests. Francis

sacked the bishop, and sent Prevost in to clear up the mess.

Allen goes into forensic detail about Prevost's dealings with the mounting abuse crisis in Peru, centred on the powerful, wealthy, reactionary movement known in Peru as *El Sodalicio*. The Sodalitium Christianae Vitae (SCV), to give it its proper name, was suppressed by Francis shortly before he died, following years of probes, sanctions and expulsions ordered by Rome. Allen followed all this closely as a journalist with Crux. Earlier, working for the Catholic News Agency – the SCV-owned outlet in Denver, Colorado, which was later bought by the conservative conglomerate EWTN – she had experienced the SCV's abusive culture first hand. Later she would give evidence – full disclosure: so did I – to a Vatican tribunal that sanctioned one of its high-ranking members, the former director of the CNA, Alejandro Bermúdez.

WE READ of Prevost's boldness in assisting *Sodalicio*'s victims in their struggle for justice, and in helping Rome intervene; of his patient, courageous confrontation with the many groups in the Church and in Peruvian society controlled by the SCV; and his encouragement of journalists seeking to uncover the corruption and cover-up. Both in Peru and later in Rome, as a curial cardinal from 2023, Prevost was key to the sanctioning and later suppression of the SCV, which he came to see was rotten at its core.

Leo is not the first Pope with baggage from his past in relation to abuse, but the first whose baggage is as a courageous reformer. He created and led Peru's safeguarding commission, and brought Fr Hans Zollner SJ over from Rome to raise the bishops' awareness of the issues. Allen painstakingly addresses the accusation that Prevost mishandled an abuse case in Chiclayo, which *Sodalicio*-adjacent sources used to try to discredit him in the run-up to the conclave, and which has been – irresponsibly, she demonstrates – repeated by the US abuse survivors' group SNAP.

What happened in Chiclayo might provide the best clue to who Leo is and how he will lead the Church. The narrative at the time of his election was that he took the diocese in a synodal, pastoral direction while carrying everyone with him, building bridges as he went. But Allen paints a far more conflicted picture.

His promotion of lay leaders, especially women, to key diocesan roles – his pastoral vicar was a layman – as well as his support for popular devotions, backing for human rights, practical emphasis on social justice and focus on the peripheries all came as a shock to a diocese governed for 30 years by Spanish Opus Dei bishops. True, Leo introduced the changes with sensitivity: John Paul II and Benedict rather than Francis were quoted to help the synodal medicine go down. But many of the Opus Dei clergy were furious at Prevost's promotion of lay people, and while most were gradually won over, a few remained bitterly opposed to the end.

Before making him prefect of the bishops' dicastery in January 2023, Francis had already been giving Prevost more responsibilities in Rome. Afterwards, he became one of the few in the Curia whom the Pope deeply trusted. Leo says his relationship with Francis was frank and fond, and they shared a sense of humour, but they weren't "intimate friends" and sometimes disagreed.

But it is clear that Leo is following in the path of the Latin American Church's reception of Vatican II, which Francis universalised in his pontificate. Leo's programme may be to build bridges and bring peace. But Allen's meticulously documented story of Prevost in Peru shows he will at the same time continue the Francis upheaval, even if more patiently, quietly, and strategically.

Austen Ivereigh's most recent book is *First Belong to God: On Retreat with Pope Francis* (Messenger Publications).

