

Gerry O'Connell - Pope Leo calls out Billionaires and Income Inequality in First Interview

"I'm obviously an American and I very much feel that I am an American, but I also love Peru very much, the Peruvian people—that is part of who I am."



Pope Leo XIV sits with Elise Allen, senior correspondent at Crux, for an interview at the pope's residence inside the Vatican's Palazzo Sant'Uffizio July 30, 2025.

Pope Leo XIV said this in his first interview since his election as the 267th successor of St. Peter on May 8, when asked about how he identifies himself after living a third of his life in Peru and another third in Italy, with the remaining third in the U.S. *"Half of my ministerial life was spent in Peru, so the Latin American perspective is very valuable to me,"* he said. *"I think that comes out also in an appreciation I have for the life of the Church from Latin America; which I believe was significant both in my connection with Pope Francis and in my understanding of parts of his vision for the Church, and how we can continue to carry that on in terms of a true prophetic vision for the Church today and tomorrow."*

Pope Leo also mentioned, unprompted, genealogical studies into his heritage that reveal he has "African roots," alongside French, Italian, Spanish, Cuban and Haitian heritage. He shared these reflections as part of a three-hour interview with Elise Ann Allen, senior correspondent at Crux, for her upcoming biography ***León XIV: ciudadano del mundo, misionero del siglo XXI*** (*Leo XIV: Citizen of the World, Missionary of the 21st Century*), to be published in Spanish by Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial on Sept. 18, with English and Portuguese editions expected in early 2026.

The pope also revealed a lighter side. When asked whether he would support the United States or Peru in the upcoming soccer World Cup, he said: *“probably Peru, just because of affective bonds.”* He added: *“People know I’m a White Sox fan, but as pope, I’m a fan of all the teams. Even at home, I grew up a White Sox fan, but my mother was a Cubs fan, so you couldn’t be one of those fans who shut out the other side. We learned, even in sports, to have an open, dialogical, friendly and not angry competitive stance on things like that, because we might not have gotten dinner had we been!”*

In the two-part interview, conducted in English, Pope Leo answers questions about his understanding of the papacy, his push for peace in the world—including in Ukraine—his desire to build bridges and overcome polarization, and his understanding of synodality.

Extracts from the interview were released on Sept. 14, the pope’s 70th birthday. Earlier that day, he greeted thousands of pilgrims and Romans who had gathered in St. Peter’s Square, cheering and wishing him “Happy Birthday” as he appeared at the window of the papal study on the third floor of the Apostolic Palace for the midday Angelus. Deeply moved by the crowd’s affectionate reception, he joked: *“Dear friends, it seems that you know that today I turn 70 years old. I give thanks to the Lord and to my parents; and I thank all those who have remembered me in their prayers. Many thanks to everyone!”*

The first Augustinian pope’s measured responses confirm he speaks with great calm, honesty, forthrightness and precision and provides substantial answers and insights to the questions raised. *“There’s still a huge learning curve ahead of me. There’s a big part of it which I feel that I have been able to move into without a whole lot of difficulty, which is the pastoral part,”* the pope says when asked how he understands the papacy. *“I’m surprised at the response, how great it continues to be.”*

On the other hand, “the totally new aspect to this job is being thrown onto the level of a world leader,” he said. *“It’s very public. People know the phone conversations or meetings I’ve had with the heads of state of a number of different governments, countries around the world, in a time when the voice of the church has a significant role to play.”* Here, he said, *“I am learning a lot about how the Holy See has had a role in the diplomatic world for many years.... Those things are all new to me in any sense of hands-on.”* He added, *“I’ve followed current affairs for many, many years, but the role of pope is certainly new to me. I’m learning a lot and feeling very challenged but not overwhelmed. On that one I had to jump in on the deep end of the pool very quickly.”*

As pope and successor to Peter, he said, *“[I am] asked to confirm others in their faith, which is the most important part, [and] is also something that can happen only by the grace of God, there’s no other explanation.”* Indeed, he said, *“The Holy Spirit is the only way to explain how did I get elected to this office, to this ministry.”* He concluded, *“I hope to be able to confirm others in their faith, because that is the most fundamental role that the Successor of Peter has.”*

From his first appearance on the balcony of St. Peter’s after his election, Leo has been advocating for peace and an end to conflicts, and especially in Ukraine. When asked how

realistic it is for the Vatican to be a mediator in that conflict, he distinguished between “*the voice of the Holy See in advocating for peace and a role as mediator.*”

“I think that people have heard the different appeals I’ve made in terms of raising my voice, the voice of Christians, and the people of goodwill, saying that peace is the only answer,” he said. *“The useless killing after these years of people on both sides—in that particular conflict, but in other conflicts—I think people have to somehow be wakened up to say, there’s another way to do this.”*

He recalled that since the beginning of the war in Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, the Holy See “*has made great efforts to maintain a position that, as difficult as it might be, [is not] one side or the other, but truly neutral.*” He acknowledged that “*some things I’ve said have been interpreted in one way or the other, and that’s alright*” but what’s truly important now is that “*a number of different actors have to push hard enough to make the parties that are at war say, enough is enough, and let’s look for another way to solve our differences.*”

Pope Leo added: “I believe strongly that we cannot give up hope, ever. I have high hopes in human nature. There is the negative side; there are bad actors, there are the temptations. On any side of any position, you can find motivations that are good and motivations that are not so good. And yet, to continue to encourage people to look at the higher values, the real values, that makes a difference. You can have hope, and you keep trying to push and say to people, ‘Let’s do this in a different way.’”

From the beginning of his pontificate, Leo has emphasized the need to build bridges. In the interview, he explained that “*the way of building bridges is primarily through dialogue.*” He added, “*one of the things that I’ve been able to do in these first couple of months is have at least some kind of dialogue, visits with world leaders from multinational organizations.*” The pope continued: “*We have to continue to remind ourselves of the potential that humanity has to overcome the violence and the hatred that is just dividing us more and more. We live in times when polarization seems to be one of the words of the day, but it’s not helping anybody. Or if it’s helping anyone, it’s very few, when everyone else is suffering. So, to continue to raise those questions, I think, is important.*”

Asked how he thinks polarization can be overcome in the world and the church today, Pope Leo said, “*I think it’s very important to start a deeper reflection, of trying to figure out: Why is the world so polarized? What’s going on?*” The pope added that he doesn’t pretend to have all the answers, but he thinks the crisis of 2020 and the pandemic had an effect on this, though he believes it started earlier. “*Perhaps in some places, the loss of a higher sense of what human life is about would have something to do with that, which has affected people on many levels. The value of human life, of the family, and the value of society. If we lose the sense of those values, what matters anymore?*”

The missionary pope, who spent half of his priestly life working among the poor, added that he thinks there are “*a couple of other factors too*” that have contributed to the polarization in the world, and “*one which I think is very significant is the continuously wider gap between the income levels of the working class and the money that the wealthiest receive.*” He cited, “*for example*” the fact that “*C.E.O.s that 60 years ago might have been making four to six times more than what the workers are receiving, the last figure I saw, it’s 600 times more than what*

average workers are receiving. Yesterday the news [said] that Elon Musk is going to be the first trillionaire in the world. What does that mean and what's that about? If that is the only thing that has value anymore, then we're in big trouble." Seeing the widening gaps in society as part of the broader polarization affecting the world, Pope Leo also highlighted how the church can model a different approach.

Pope Leo sees "synodality" as "a sort of antidote to polarization," he told Ms. Allen, when asked how he defined synodality. As a cardinal, he had attended both sessions of the Synod on Synodality in October 2023 and October 2024, and gave this answer:

Synodality is an attitude, an openness, a willingness to understand. Speaking of the church now, this means each and every member of the church has a voice and a role to play through prayer, reflection... through a process. There are many ways that that could happen, but of dialogue and respect of one another. To bring people together and to understand that relationship, that interaction, that creating opportunities of encounter, is an important dimension of how we live our life as church.

The pope went on to acknowledge that "some people have felt threatened by [synodality]. Sometimes bishops or priests might feel, 'synodality is going to take away my authority,'" he said, "That's not what synodality is about, and maybe your idea of what your authority is, is somewhat out of focus, mistaken."

"I think that synodality is a way of describing how we can come together and be a community and seek communion as a church, so that it's a church whose primary focus is not on an institutional hierarchy, but rather on a sense of 'we together,' 'our church,' he explained. "Each person with his or her own vocation—priests or laity, bishops, missionaries, families—everyone with a specific vocation that they've been given has a role to play and something to contribute and together we look for the way to grow and walk together as church."

Synodality, he said, "is an attitude which I think can teach a lot to the world today. A little bit ago we were talking about polarization. I think this is sort of an antidote. I think this is a way of addressing some of the greatest challenges that we have in the world today. If we listen to the Gospel, and if we reflect upon it together, and if we strive to walk forward together, listening to one another, trying to discover what God is saying to us today, there is a lot to be gained for us there."

From his first appearance on the balcony on the night of his election he confirmed his commitment to synodality. In the interview, he said:

I think there's great hope if we can continue to build on the experience of the past couple years and find ways of being church together. Not to try and transform the church into some kind of democratic government.... But respecting, understanding the life of the church for what it is and saying, "we have to do this together." I think that offers a great opportunity to the church and offers an opportunity for the church to engage with the rest of the world. Since the time of the Second Vatican Council, I think that's been significant, and there's a lot to be done yet.

Readers will get a deeper glimpse into Pope Leo's life and vision when Ms. Allen's biography is published on Sept. 18.

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