

POPE LEO AT THE GYM!

Tom Kington - 'I tried Pope Leo XIV's fitness routine — he's Mass-fit'

Forty reps for Pope Leo XIV — the 69-year-old Holy Father pulls 25kg with each arm to stay in shape, can our reporter keep pace with him?

Try pulling 25kg with each arm. Do it 40 times (with pauses) as Pope Leo did two or three times a week before his election, and you are in good shape.

“For a man of 69, he was surprisingly fit — you could see he exercised,” said Valerio Masella, an instructor at the gym who put Leo through his paces and offered this week to give me the papal workout — or to put it another way, to show me how to pump iron like a Pope.

Since he was named the world's first American pontiff and took the name Leo XIV, thousands of articles have been written about Robert Prevost's views, theology and background. But apart from mentions of his decent tennis game, few details have emerged about his fitness regime, which will be of keen interest to experts who like to predict how long popes live.

The man who knows is Masella, 26, a soft-spoken Roman who said he had no idea who his regular customer was until he had seen him emerging in papal white on the balcony of St Peter's. “I thought to myself, ‘I train this person!’,” he said.

Prevost frequented the Omega gym, yards from the main gate into the Vatican, after arriving in Rome in 2023 to run the Vatican's department appointing bishops, just before he was named a cardinal by Pope Francis.

“I asked him what he did for a living and he simply said ‘I'm pretty busy’. I thought he was a professor,” Masella said, who added that Prevost would arrive in a tracksuit for his 45-minute sessions, often accompanied by his Peruvian secretary, Father Edgard Ivan Rimaycuna.

To get me started on Leo's routine, Masella put me on an exercise bike for a brisk ten-minute ride as techno pumped out from the sound system. At the entrance, women in leotards drifted in for pilates past the large framed photo of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Next in Leo's routine came a ten-minute burst of fast walking on the treadmill, which Masella adjusted as I climbed on to add the same incline Leo exercised with. “His secretary would do the bike and treadmill alongside him then sit it out while he moved on to the weights,” he said.

Masella guided me to the press machine, where I sat with my back to the weights and pushed on pulleys to hoist them. As Prevost did, I lifted 15kg with each arm 20 times, with a pause then the same again, for total of three to four sets.

“That's good for the front of the shoulders and triceps,” Masella said. I then moved over to the low pull, sitting to face the weights this time and pull the pulleys.

Prevost would complete four sets of ten pulls with 25kg loaded on each arm. After doing ten, I was grimacing, so if the leader of world's 1.4 billion Catholics can do it, he's pretty trim under his cassock.

“He wanted to use this machine to straighten his shoulders,” Masella said. Despite having “Natural born trainer” emblazoned across on the back of his T-shirt, Masella said he wasn't planning to make a big deal out of his now famous customer and would not be adding “Pope trainer” to his CV.

“It's not about me, it's about how I can help our customers,” he said. The gym's owner, Alessandro Tamburlani, said he hoped “If the Pope can, everyone can,” he said, adding, “I also hope that being fit helps him live longer.”

“He now needs to fight for peace as Pope, but our door is always open if he needs to exercise. Otherwise I hope he can get out onto the tennis court at the Vatican.”



Tom Kington is trained by Valerio Masella, who was personal trainer to Cardinal Robert Prevost, now Leo XIV



On the low-pull machine, where Prevost did four sets of ten with 25kg on each arm



Masella said he was not planning to make a big deal out of his famous client

(Originally published in The Times – 18.5.25)