

Chicago native Cardinal Prevost elected pope, takes name Leo XIV

A native of Chicago and Augustinian missionary who worked for years in Peru, the new Pope Leo XIV had been working at the Vatican as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops under the late Pope Francis.

Cindy Wooden



Pope Leo XIV, the former Cardinal Robert F. Prevost, waves to the crowds in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican after his election as pope May 8, 2025. The new pope was born in Chicago. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- Cardinal Robert F. Prevost, the Chicago-born prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops under Pope Francis, was elected the 267th pope May 8 and took the name Pope Leo XIV.

He is the first North American to be elected pope and, before the conclave, was the U.S. cardinal most mentioned as a potential successor of St. Peter.



White smoke billows from the chimney of the Vatican's Sistine Chapel May 8, 2025, indicating a new pope has been elected. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

The white smoke poured from the chimney on the roof of the Sistine Chapel at 6:07 p.m. Rome time and a few minutes later the bells of St. Peter's Basilica began to ring.

About 20 minutes later the Vatican police band and two dozen members of the Pontifical Swiss Guard marched into St. Peter's Square. They soon were joined by the marching band of the Italian Carabinieri, a branch of military police, and by units of the other branches of the Italian military.

As soon as news began to spread, people from all over Rome ran to join the tens of thousands who were already in the square for the smoke watch. Rome Mayor Roberto Gualtieri was among them.

French Cardinal Dominique Mamberti, protodeacon of the College of Cardinals, appeared on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at 7:12 p.m. He told the crowd: "I announce to you a great joy. We have a pope ('Habemus papam')," saying the cardinal's name in Latin and announcing the name by which he will be called.

Ten minutes later, the new Pope Leo came out onto the balcony, smiling and waving to the crowd wearing the white papal cassock, a red mozzetta or cape and a red stole to give his first public blessing "urbi et orbi" (to the city and the world).

The crowd shouted repeatedly, "Viva il papa" or "Long live the pope" as Pope Leo's eyes appeared to tear up.



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"Peace be with you," were Pope Leo's first words to the crowd.

"My dear brothers and sisters, this is the first greeting of the risen Christ, the good shepherd who gave his life for God's flock," he said, praying that Christ's peace would enter people's hearts, their families and "the whole earth."

The peace of the risen Lord, he said, is "a peace that is unarmed and disarming." Signaling strong continuity with the papacy of Pope Francis, Pope Leo told the crowd that God "loves all of us unconditionally" and that the church must be open to everyone.

"We are all in God's hands," he said, so "without fear, united, hand in hand with God and with each other, let us go forward."

He thanked the cardinals who elected him, apparently on the fourth ballot of the conclave, "to be the successor of Peter and to walk with you as a united church always seeking peace, justice" and together being missionary disciples of Christ. Telling the crowd that he was an Augustinian, he quoted St. Augustine, who said, "With you I am a Christian and for you a bishop."

"Together we must try to be a missionary church, a church that builds bridges and always dialogues, that is always open to receiving everyone like this square with its arms open to everyone, everyone in need," he said.

The new bishop of Rome told the people of his diocese and of the whole Catholic Church, "We want to be a synodal church, a church that journeys, a church that seeks peace always, that always seeks charity, that wants to be close to people, especially those who are suffering."

After asking the crowd to recite the Hail Mary with him, Pope Leo gave his first solemn blessing.

Cardinals over the age of 80, who were not eligible to enter the conclave, joined the crowd in the square. Among them were Cardinals Seán P. O'Malley, the retired archbishop of Boston; Donald W. Wuerl, the retired archbishop of Washington; and Marc Ouellet, retired prefect of the Congregation for Bishops.

A longtime missionary in Peru, the 69-year-old pope holds both U.S. and Peruvian citizenship.

La Repubblica, the major Italian daily, described him April 25 as "cosmopolitan and shy," but also said he was "appreciated by conservatives and progressives. He has global visibility in a conclave in which few (cardinals) know each other."

That visibility comes from the fact that as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops for the past two years, he was instrumental in helping Pope Francis choose bishops for many Latin-rite dioceses, he met hundreds of bishops during their "ad limina" visits to Rome and was called to assist the world's Latin-rite bishops "in all matters concerning the correct and fruitful exercise of the pastoral office entrusted to them."



Crowds cheer in St. Peter's Square as white smoke billows from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican May 8, 2025, indicating the election of a new pope. (CNS photo/Pablo Esparza)

The new pope was serving as bishop of Chiclayo, Peru, when Pope Francis called him to the Vatican in January 2023.

During a talk at St. Jude Parish in Chicago in August, the then-cardinal said Pope Francis nominated him "specifically because he did not want someone from the Roman Curia to take on this role. He wanted a missionary; he wanted someone from outside; he wanted someone who would come in with a different perspective."

In a March 2024 interview with Catholic News Service, he said Pope Francis' decision in 2022 to name three women as full members of the dicastery, giving them input on the selection of bishops "contributes significantly to the process of discernment in looking for who we hope are the best candidates to serve the church in episcopal ministry."

To deter attitudes of clericalism among bishops, he said, "it's important to find men who are truly interested in serving, in preaching the Gospel, not just with eloquent words, but rather with the example and witness they give."

In fact, the cardinal said, Pope Francis' "most effective and important" bulwark against clericalism was his being "a pastor who preaches by gesture."

In an interview in 2023 with Vatican News, then-Cardinal Prevost spoke about the essential leadership quality of a bishop.

"Pope Francis has spoken of four types of closeness: closeness to God, to brother bishops, to priests and to all God's people," he said. "One must not give in to the temptation to live isolated, separated in a palace, satisfied with a certain social level or a certain level within the church."

"And we must not hide behind an idea of authority that no longer makes sense today," he said. "The authority we have is to serve, to accompany priests, to be pastors and teachers."

As prefect of the dicastery then-Cardinal Prevost also served as president of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, where nearly 40% of the world's Catholics reside.

A Chicago native, he also served as prior general of the Augustinians and spent more than two decades serving in Peru, first as an Augustinian missionary and later as bishop of Chiclayo.

Soon after coming to Rome to head the dicastery, he told Vatican News that bishops have a special mission of promoting the unity of the church.

"The lack of unity is a wound that the church suffers, a very painful one," he said in May 2023. "Divisions and polemics in the church do not help anything. We bishops especially must accelerate this movement toward unity, toward communion in the church."

In September, a television program in Peru reported on the allegations of three women who said that then-Bishop Prevost failed to act against a priest who sexually abused them as minors. The diocese strongly denied the accusation, pointing out that he personally met with the victims in April 2022, removed the priest from his parish, suspended him from ministry and conducted a local investigation that was then forwarded to the Vatican. The Vatican said there was insufficient evidence to proceed, as did the local prosecutor's office.

Pope Leo was born Sept. 14, 1955, in Chicago, Illinois. He holds a bachelor's degree in mathematics from the Augustinian-run Villanova University in

Pennsylvania and joined the order in 1977, making his solemn vows in 1981. He holds a degree in theology from the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and a doctorate from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome.

He joined the Augustinian mission in Peru in 1985 and largely worked in the country until 1999 when he was elected head of the Augustinians' Chicago-based province.

From 2001 to 2013, he served as prior general of the worldwide order. In 2014, Pope Francis named him bishop of Chiclayo, in northern Peru, and the pope asked him also to be apostolic administrator of Callao, Peru, from April 2020 to May 2021.

The new pope speaks English, Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese and can read Latin and German.