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Leo XIV: What Can We Expect?

By Michel Chambon and Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

As the leader of the world's 1.4 billion Catholics, the new pope wields immense influence. Understanding who he is and his agenda will be useful for thinking about how Catholics and others, globally and in the region, will be affected by his words and actions.

COMMENTARY

On the evening of 8 May 2025, the day the West commemorated the end of the Second World War, the College of Cardinals elected a new pope after only four rounds of voting. This American prelate, Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, notable for his extensive ecclesiastical and international experience, has taken the name Leo XIV. The swift election of a candidate considered both moderate and firm, and relatively young at just 69 years old, appears to send a clear message to the Catholic Church and to the world: the social concerns, integral engagement, and reformist orientation of Pope Francis are here to stay, but the style of leadership is set to evolve.

During his first appearance on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, Leo XIV delivered a brief address – spoken in Italian and Spanish, but notably not in English – where he emphasised the theme of peace, a central tenet of the Holy See's international diplomacy. A polyglot, a consensus-builder with rich international experience, both an accomplished pastoral leader and an administrator of the Roman Curia, the new Pontiff brings a valuable combination of qualities that the Holy See will desperately need to navigate the many high-intensity conflicts and geopolitical tensions afflicting our world.

Background

A native of Chicago, Leo XIV's parentage consists of a father of French and Italian descent and a Spanish-speaking mother from New Orleans. He is the first pope from the United States, and following Francis, the second from the Americas. However, having spent around forty years of his life in Peru, of which he is also a citizen, Leo XIV can claim to know both continents intimately and is attuned to the tensions running through them. Cardinal Prevost had repeatedly advocated for respectful migration policies and emphasised the fundamental dignity inherent in freedom of movement.

His connection to both the Global North and the Global South is a potential reason why he became a quickly established consensus figure. Indeed, Cardinal Prevost is not without Asian experience. As former Prior General of the Augustinian Order, he spent 12 years regularly visiting Asian regions where the order was present, including China, South Korea, India, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. He has firsthand experience of the continent, its rich political tapestry, and its major actors. His Italian ancestry and language skills are also an asset, given his role as Bishop of Rome. Indeed, the Italian and many other cardinals would be aware that this means he must be able to relate to the local context, both the people and the political system.

American Context

As someone from Chicago, an influential and socially engaged archdiocese that also acts as a bridge between the extremes of American political life, Leo XIV may also be someone who can establish a constructive relationship with the White House. This task is particularly delicate given that Pope Francis had publicly called American bishops to resist certain policies of the new administration, and as Cardinal Prevost, he supported Francis in this. Again, as Cardinal Prevost, he publicly criticised US Vice President J.D. Vance on immigration policy and the latter's flawed understanding of Catholic teaching.

The Holy See cannot ignore the challenges the second Trump administration poses, nor can it afford direct confrontation. By electing the first pope from the United States, the cardinals have taken a realistic and strategic step to engage the only superpower of our time more effectively, to preserve the Holy See's capacity for action, and to mobilise American Catholics.

Certainly, while some Trump supporters seemed outraged by Leo XIV's election, both Trump and Vance positively welcomed him as the new Catholic pontiff. For many, the choosing of a pope from the world's only superpower is a surprise, but his wider global experience and wider American background, with Peruvians having welcomed him as one of their own, mitigates this aspect.

Geopolitical Issues

Numerous other geopolitical issues await the new pontificate. With Pope Francis frequently denouncing the "martyrdom" of Ukraine and Gaza, relations between the Holy See and both Russia and Israel have become significantly strained. The Holy See knows too well that condemning war is easy, but making peace possible is far more complex. Leo XIV now faces the difficult task of identifying new paths to mobilise

various parties in order to silence weapons and build a just peace for all. As Cardinal Prevost, he was seemingly quiet about Gaza, so we wait to see what his approach will be.

A major challenge also lies in strengthening dialogue and cooperation with China – an upcoming superpower the Holy See cannot ignore. Although Pope Francis succeeded in establishing a framework for working relations with Beijing, setbacks, doubts and criticisms persist. China's absence from Pope Francis' funeral and its unilateral election of two bishops during the interregnum starkly underscored the unpredictability of Sino-Vatican relations.

In the Holy See's efforts to promote peace, it is important to finally note that Leo XIV has few natural geopolitical allies with significant influence. In today's world, there are no major Catholic powers clearly inclined to support the Vatican's global role. This reality may present both an opportunity and a challenge for the Holy See's autonomy, provided that Leo XIV can identify effective levers to advance his priorities.

Pastoral Issues and Style

Undoubtedly, part of Francis' appeal was his welcoming and accepting stance towards people of many backgrounds. While Francis was strict doctrinally and in relation to Church teaching on issues such as abortion, marriage, and homosexuality, he found creative ways to open space for all and challenge ecclesial forms of exclusion. Leo XIV will have to affirm or adjust this legacy while engaging more conservative Catholics, especially in parts of Africa, where Francis was welcomed but his seeming toleration of homosexuality was contentious.

In terms of what to expect from Leo XIV, it may be useful to recall a statement he made as Cardinal Prevost in 2024 concerning Catholic leadership: "The bishop is not supposed to be a little prince sitting in his kingdom". For Leo XIV, humility and proximity are essential to effective leadership – within and beyond the Church.

At the same time, in choosing the name Leo, the new pope has dared to evoke three powerful symbols of Catholicism: Leo the Great, credited with halting Attila the Hun, and so remembered as a peacemaker and protector of the Holy See; Brother Leo, the close companion and faithful heir of Saint Francis of Assisi, and so perhaps an allusion to how he will continue Pope Francis' legacy; and Leo XIII who firmly established the Church's social doctrine with an emphasis on workers and the poor.

Speaking to the other Cardinals, Leo XIV explicitly connected his name to Leo XIII, stating that "In our own day, the church offers everyone the treasury of its social teaching in response to another industrial revolution and to developments in the field of artificial intelligence that pose new challenges for the defense of human dignity, justice and labor."

There are emerging allegations that he may have failed to report on sexual abuse allegations twenty years ago. This will have to be carefully assessed. However, as pope, we can only hope that he will continue Francis' work to make the institution more resistant to the possibility of offenders within its ranks, and to become a potential model for other institutions.

Singapore and Southeast Asia

As Francis has just visited Southeast Asia and Singapore, it is doubtful that Leo XIV will see a visit here as a priority. However, he has been well known in the Philippines, India and Indonesia since his time as head of the Augustinian order and has visited on several occasions. He is therefore aware of challenges in the region. As someone more consensual, it seems that he will be less contentious about issues of sexuality for Singapore's Catholic community, and while promoting Francis' social teaching, he may be more centrist and able to unite different factions.

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