



**Leo XIV:
An Augustinian Pope**

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Peace Be with All of You

I am an Augustinian, a son of Saint Augustine, who once said, “With you I am a Christian, and for you I am a bishop.” In this sense, all of us can journey together toward the homeland that God has prepared for us.¹

Abstract

Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, OSA, was elected the 267th pope on May 8, 2025, becoming the first American pontiff and first Augustinian to hold the office. Taking the name Leo XIV, his leadership is deeply shaped by his order’s spirituality, emphasizing interiority, community, and the integration of faith and reason. His episcopal motto, *In illo uno unum* (“In the One, we are one”), reflects a Christocentric vision focused on unity.

Following Pope Francis’s legacy, Leo XIV advocates for a synodal, missionary Church that builds bridges and engages in dialogue, particularly with China. Beijing congratulated his election, and he swiftly continued the Sino-Vatican agreement on bishop appointments. He also reaffirms Francis’s commitment to integral ecology, framing environmental stewardship as a response to sin and a path to redemption.

On contemporary issues, Leo XIV urges ethical guidelines for artificial intelligence to protect human dignity and warns against technology that fosters alienation. His first major teaching document, the apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te*, centers the Church’s mission on a Christologically

rooted, preferential love for the poor, calling for both immediate charity and structural transformation.

Described as humble, thoughtful, and collaborative, Leo XIV models an Augustinian approach of listening and communal discernment. His pontificate seeks to unite the Church, promote peace, and address modern challenges while drawing on the spiritual wisdom of St. Augustine of Hippo.

Keywords: Augustinian, Dialogue, Integral Ecology, Peace, Preferential Option for the Poor, Synodality, Unity

Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, OSA, was elected as the 267th successor of Saint Peter on May 8, 2025, and chose the name Leo XIV. The first pontiff from the United States and the first Augustinian to be elected pope, the 70-year-old Prevost had spent many years as a missionary in Peru.

Born on September 14, 1955, in Chicago, Illinois, Robert Prevost studied first at the Minor Seminary of the Augustinian Fathers. After graduating with a degree in Mathematics from the Augustinian-run Villanova University in Pennsylvania, he joined the Order of St. Augustine in 1977, making his solemn vows in 1981. On June 19, 1982, he was ordained a priest at the Augustinian College of Saint Monica in Rome by Archbishop Jean Jadot. He holds a degree in theology from the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, as well as a licentiate and a doctorate in canon law from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum) in Rome.

According to Fr. Thomas White, OP, Rector of the Angelicum, Prevost's doctoral thesis, "The Office and Authority of the Local Prior in the Order of Saint Augustine," presents a vision that could be applied to his papacy. This work reflects on obedience and authority in the Church, community life, respect for human persons, and how the prior can best

guide his brethren by modelling on Christ and cultivating a selfless life in service of the common good.

With his training in canon law and his practice of interior listening and communal discernment, Leo will readily see the importance of distinguishing between the process of “*decision-making*” and the act of “*decision-taking*”² especially in settings that engage (but are by no means limited to) the Catholic Church’s steadily growing practice of synodality. His doctoral thesis offers a theory of obedience that is in full accord with Gospel values and magisterial teaching on authority:

Obedience is something exerted through the life of the mind, open to the truth of the faith, the truth indicated by the rule of life, and the will is to consent freely by understanding a shared truth the community wants to live together.³

Fr. White remarks that God has prepared Prevost to be a leader of the Catholic Church who is respectful of the conscience and freedom of everyone under his care.

The Augustinian approach to dialogue, reconciliation, and the integration of faith and reason in dealing with contemporary challenges would likely be reflected in Leo’s papal policies. His missionary background suggests a pastoral approach centered on inclusivity, compassion, and the dignity of every person. As an Augustinian, Leo XIV is likely to emphasize the importance of community life, the transformative power of grace, and most importantly, the Church’s call to listen attentively and respond to the needs of the faithful.

Robert Prevost is described as simple, humble, and thoughtful, with an open ear for all. We will witness a pontiff who is strong yet approachable, who is balanced, and who seeks common ground through dialogue and respect for diverse viewpoints. His papal

leadership will likely be characterized by a practical style that stresses clarity and consensus-building rather than forceful action.

This essay examines Leo XIV's Augustinian roots, which give us insight into his pastoral orientation and theological approach as he begins his pontificate. Inspired by Pope Leo XIII, especially his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the new pontiff has also expressed gratitude to Pope Francis' legacy, calling for a synodal Church, continuing the pursuit of Sino-Vatican relations, emphasizing care of creation, and stressing Christ's love for the poor. In his attempt to advance the work of Pope Francis, we can expect this Leonine pontificate to be infused with the spirit of St. Augustine of Hippo.

The Lion Returns

Speaking to the members of the Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice Foundation in the Vatican on May 17, 2025, Leo XIV emphasized the importance of Catholic social teaching in confronting contemporary challenges. Echoing Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* and the Second Vatican Council, he invited his audience:

to participate actively and creatively in this discernment process, and thus contribute, with all of God's people, to the development of the Church's social doctrine in this age of significant social changes, listening to everyone and engaging in dialogue with all. In our day, there is a widespread thirst for justice, a desire for authentic fatherhood and motherhood, a profound longing for spirituality, especially among young people and the marginalized, who do not always find effective means of making their needs known. There is a growing demand for the Church's social doctrine, to which we need to respond.⁴

Leo XIII is regarded as the pioneer of modern Catholic social teaching for his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. In January 1895, he also issued *Longinqua*, an encyclical addressed to the Catholic Church in the United States, praising the nation for its accomplishments and advancements, but warning against an American individualism and secularism that threaten Catholic teachings:

All intelligent men are agreed, and We Ourselves have with pleasure intimated it above, that America seems destined for greater things. Now, it is our wish that the Catholic Church should not only share in, but help to bring about, this prospective greatness.⁵

Unless inspired by God, Leo XIII would not have imagined that an American would not only one day occupy the Petrine Office but also share his name. This came as a surprise to many, because it had been widely believed that as long as the United States remained a superpower, it would never have a pope. A citizen of a nation already dominant in global political, cultural, and social spheres was thought unfit to hold ecclesial power. However, the election of Robert Prevost as Pope Leo XIV demonstrated that the cardinals in the Conclave were not concerned about geopolitical power. The Italian media considers him “the least American of the American cardinals” because of his international experience as a missionary in Peru and as Prior General of the Order of St. Augustine. It was “unity and not nationality” that moved the cardinals to elect Robert Prevost as the successor of St. Peter.⁶

The United States has indeed grown and prospered as a nation since the time of Leo XIII. Unfortunately, the Catholic culture that nurtured Robert Prevost’s early life has declined. Leo XIII had observed that the nation’s moral crisis is related to its religious belief:

For without morality the State cannot endure—a truth which that illustrious citizen of yours [George Washington], whom We have just mentioned, with a keenness of insight worthy of his genius and statesmanship perceived and proclaimed. But the best and strongest support of morality is religion.... Now what is the Church other than a legitimate society, founded by the will and ordinance of Jesus Christ for the preservation of morality and the defense of religion?⁷

In this letter, Leo XIII also mentions a “fountain of blessings”; this is none other than the grace of Christ mediated by the Church for the salvation of souls and the pursuit of happiness and peace in this life. The sacred and secular spheres are “entangled” or “intermingled” as we see also in St. Augustine’s teaching on the Two Cities: the City of God created by the love of God, and the Earthly City created by self-love.⁸ *Both are placed side by side on earth*, a fundamental point often overlooked.

Their “intermingling” means that human beings live in historical time in the *saeculum*, the age between Christ’s First and Second Coming. Therefore, adherents of both cities must learn to co-exist side by side and to discern good from evil in a journey from the City of Man to the City of God. For St. Augustine, the unique character of “the secular” (to be distinguished from the modern use of the term “secularist”) is not any supposed moral neutrality of the public square of the Earthly City, or the total exclusion of religion from it. Rather, it is that human existence is bound to history, a pilgrimage in real time and space in an imperfect world, always mediating between the fallen and the redeemed. Our intelligence alone cannot, without wisdom and virtue, keep us from self-destruction by the very things we make in an increasingly synthetic, mimetic world.

Addressing Artificial Intelligence

Our new pontiff could not have arrived at a more critical time, as recent years have been marked by intense political and economic turmoil, moral crisis, and technological disruption. In particular, with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), we are witnessing not just an “era of change” but “a change of era.”⁹ Affecting our economy, personal relationships, knowledge, and creativity, AI prompts us to ask what it means to be human. “Nothing that comes from man and his creativity should be used to undermine the dignity of others,” the pope said during the first Mass for Catholic social media personnel at the Vatican. Emphasizing that developing technology should be used for the “benefit of all humanity,”¹⁰ Leo has observed that the mass media sometimes substitute for Catholic teachings, leading some to wonder if the institutional Church is still relevant.¹¹

The new pontiff is deeply concerned about the impact that AI may have on human dignity, equality, and employment. While there are undeniable benefits to using AI, there is also the danger of misinformation, erosion of privacy, and detrimental effects on human relationships. The use of AI risks increasing loneliness and alienation, as technology often replaces genuine human interaction. These challenges demand that we return to Catholic social teaching, which emphasizes human dignity, equality, and the common good.

Highlighting the Church’s role in guiding the faithful through this technological revolution, Leo XIV is likely to advocate a balanced approach to AI, harnessing its potential for creativity and progress while safeguarding human rights and dignity. Building on the legacy of *Rerum Novarum*, the new pontiff offers moral and spiritual guidance to ensure that this technological advancement serves humanity rather than enslaves it. His commitment to promoting peace calls for ethical guidelines and responsible development in the wake of this transformative effect on our society.

Indeed, Pope Francis expressed similar concerns. On January 14, 2025, he approved the publication of the comprehensive doctrinal note “*Antiqua et Nova: Note on the Relationship between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence*” by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Education and Culture.¹² While welcoming scientific and technological progress, the text calls, among other things, for “a renewed wisdom of the heart”¹³ echoing a tradition of Christian spirituality profoundly shaped by St. Augustine.

The Augustinian Way of the Heart places great stress on interior reflection and ethical discernment, embodied learning and empathy, and a personalist holistic understanding of what it means to be human beings made in God’s image and likeness. What radically distinguishes us from AI is rooted in our intentional self-reflexive consciousness and the heart-mind, and in the unity of body, soul, and spirit. *Antiqua et Nova* speaks of a human “relational intelligence” that cannot be replicated by AI. It is a form of intelligence that develops within lived human experiences in all their dimensions, incorporating intuitive insight, creativity, and love.

Truths of the Human Condition

Our society is now questioning truths that we once took for granted, such as gender identity and the enduring importance of the family. Together with the advances of modern technologies, new ideologies pose fresh challenges for the Church. Leo XIII responded to the social upheavals of his day, particularly those arising from the Industrial Revolution, with deep spiritual insight. Likewise, today’s Church must renew and expand her social teaching in response to “new things,” just as Leo XIII did in *Rerum Novarum*.

The fundamental principles of such renewal and expansion remain the same: defending the dignity of the human person, pursuing the common good, and upholding the principle of distributive justice to ensure every individual has enough to live decently. The principle of

subsidiarity maintains that social problems should be addressed at the appropriate level of authority. This principle allows families and local communities to function in an orderly and meaningful way.

In this crucial moment, Leo XIV will likely be guided by the tradition in which he was formed—the teachings of St. Augustine. Acknowledging his fear and weakness as a spiritual leader, the bishop of Hippo placed his trust in Jesus Christ, identifying with his flock. This attitude of humble dependence may well shape Leo XIV's pastoral leadership:

What I am for you terrifies me; what I am with you consoles me. For you I am a bishop; but with you I am a Christian. The former is a duty; the latter a grace. The former is a danger; the latter, salvation.¹⁴

Leo XIV's episcopal motto, *In illo uno unum* ("In the One [Christ], we are one"), is a phrase taken from St. Augustine's commentary on Psalm 127: "These Christians, with their Head, who ascended to heaven, are one Christ; it is not He one and we many, but, being many in that one, we are one."¹⁵ Emphasizing the unity of Christians and the communion within the Church, this motto expresses the Christocentric vision of St. Augustine, where unity can be found in Christ alone.

Augustinian Charisms and Spirituality

During the time of Leo XIII, a revival of Thomistic theology was needed to clarify Church doctrines with precision. Today, however, the Church needs the humanness of Augustinian charisms and spirituality, with their emphasis on communion, to restore unity and peace in our society.

Having dedicated himself to the Augustinian Order for more than 55 years, it is no surprise that Leo XIV introduced himself on the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica after his election as a "son of St. Augustine, an Augustinian."¹⁶ In 2024, at St. Jude Catholic Church in Illinois, he said,

I'm an Augustinian.... I have personally a great debt to the Order of Saint Augustine, to St. Augustine himself, [his] philosophy, theology, thought, humanity; that great love of Augustine for God's Word, that infinite searching for truth, for himself, and for God in himself; and for everything that Augustine taught in terms of communion and community that marked my life.¹⁷

For St. Augustine, unity means the "sacramental bond of Christians in the Church."¹⁸

Shortly after being made a cardinal, Robert Prevost said in an interview:

When I think of St. Augustine, his vision and understanding of what it means to belong to the Church, one of the first things that springs to mind is what he says about how you cannot say you are a follower of Christ without being part of the Church. Christ is part of the Church. He is the head. So people who think they can follow Christ "in their own way" without being part of the body are, unfortunately, living a distortion of what is really an authentic experience. St. Augustine's teachings touch every part of life, and help us to live in communion.

Unity and communion are essential charisms of the life of the Order and a fundamental part of understanding what the Church is and what it means to be in it.¹⁹

Augustinian spirituality stresses the search for God through "interiority, prayer, community, and service."²⁰ This model is epitomized in the conversion of St. Augustine as narrated in the *Confessions*. Furthermore, Augustine emphasizes the importance of friendship as a divine gift that draws us closer to God. Leo XIV expresses it this way:

Different people can greatly enhance our lives. And, to tell the truth, as an Augustinian, having a rich community built on the ability to share with others what happens to us, to be open to others, has been one of the greatest gifts I have been given in this life. The gift of friendship brings us back to Jesus himself. To have the ability to develop authentic friendships in life is beautiful. Without a doubt, friendship is one of the most wonderful gifts that God has given us.²¹

The Augustinian way of life is manifested in the Order's emblem—a flaming heart pierced by an arrow above an open book. St. Augustine used the Latin word *cor* (heart) no fewer than 8,000 times in his writings and sermons.²² The flaming heart, burning with passionate love for God and neighbor, symbolizes the spiritual longing and restlessness of the human heart of which Augustine speaks in the famous opening lines of his *Confessions*: “You have made us for yourself (O Lord), and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”²³ The arrow that pierces the heart stands for the Spirit of God penetrating the human soul as expressed by Augustine, “With your word you pierced my heart, and I love you.”²⁴ The open book beneath the heart symbolizes sacred Scripture and recalls Augustine's conversion when he heard a voice telling him, “*Tolle, lege*” (Take and read).²⁵

Unlike the Franciscans, Dominicans, or Jesuits, the Augustinians do not have a single founder. Thus, the Order of St. Augustine has been somewhat overshadowed by orders with charismatic founders such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Dominic de Guzman, or St. Ignatius of Loyola. To be Augustinian is to be formed not by the Order's founder, but by the inspiration of St. Augustine himself. Surrounded by friends and living in community, Augustine articulated a profoundly ecclesial vision of Christian life. Whereas mystics tend to be individualistic, Augustine described heaven as a city, the ultimate community perfected in divine love.

The charisms of the Augustinians are characterized by interiority and communality. These core values are captured by two points in the Order's Constitutions. The first states: "It is necessary, then, that we always turn back to ourselves, and entering within, diligently work toward perfecting our heart so that, praying with uninterrupted desire we may come to God." The second notes: "Community is the axis around which Augustinian religious life turns: a community of brothers who live harmoniously in their house, united by a single soul and a single heart, seeking God together and open to the service of the Church."²⁶

Grounded in personal prayer, the Augustinian friar is also called to community life—his restless heart yearns to be with God and with his brothers. These two aspects of his life bear witness to the Gospel and the evangelization of the world: "The Augustinian community is called to be a prophetic sign in the world to the extent that fraternal life becomes a source of sharing and a cause of hope."²⁷

With this Augustinian vision, Leo XIV has opened his pontificate by praying for peace and emphasizing bridge-building, community, and dialogue. In our increasingly isolated digital age, the Augustinian tradition reminds us that genuine communion and friendship are essential to human flourishing. The Augustinian Constitutions assert: "[W]hen we are open to the world, we feel ourselves in solidarity with the human family and involved in its concerns, especially through an openness to the needs of the poor and the suffering, in the knowledge that the more we are united to Christ, the more fruitful will our apostolate be."²⁸ This includes reaching out to the marginalized, migrants, and refugees.

Restoring a deeper sense of community in the Church will likely be among the pontiff's top priorities. Leo's papal motto—*In illo uno unum*, "in the One, we are one"—expresses his mission to unite the Church as the Body of Christ. St. Augustine asserted that "although we Christians are many, in the one Christ we are one" and "churches are not made

perfect by drawing only on the perfect.”²⁹ In other words, we are a community of sinners progressing with God’s grace and mercy “to become the heavenly solidarity of saints.”³⁰

To be in communion with others, we must first be in communion with God and with ourselves—this is the heart of the Augustinian tradition. Like Pope Innocent IV, who called the hermits out of their isolation, Leo XIV is likely to call us out of our “false hermitage of isolationism, partisanship, and xenophobia. . . to the true hermitage of living in Deum—into God.”³¹ Quoting St. Augustine, Pope Leo said, “Let us live well and the times will be good. We are the times.”³²

The Order of St. Augustine

Founded in 1244 in Italy, the Augustinian Order traces its origin to several communities of hermits living in the region of Tuscany who gathered to establish a unified way of life. They requested permission from Pope Innocent IV to form an order under one common Rule of Life and a Superior General, similar to other mendicant orders that had recently been established. In response, the pope gave them the Rule of St. Augustine and asked representatives from each of their houses to gather in chapter and to elect a Prior General, who would be “the sign and principal promoter of their desired unity.”³³

Gradually, the number of friars grew, and the Order spread to other parts of Italy. Other groups of hermits, mostly in central Italy, began to join them, forming what became known as the Grand Union of the Order in 1256. The eremitical spirituality that characterized the early groups gradually gave way to a more communal lifestyle with a focus on contemplation and pastoral work. Like the Franciscans and Dominicans, the Augustinians became part of the mendicant movement in the Church, engaging in the work of evangelization.

By the fourteenth century, there were already 8,000 members established in many countries, serving as pastors, educators, scholars,

and missionaries. Responding to the needs of the communities, some worked as carpenters, farmers, and bakers, embodying the humility and practicality of Augustine's ideal of service. In every field, their sole purpose was to proclaim the Gospel according to the way of life envisioned by St. Augustine. This vision of life, following Augustinian spirituality and liturgical norms, was also shared by female religious communities and lay fraternities who lived according to the same spiritual ideals.

The Catholic Church experienced its major missionary expansion as part of the Age of Exploration, beginning in the late fifteenth century and continuing through the sixteenth century. During this period, the Augustinians, together with other religious orders, ventured to distant lands to proclaim the Gospel and lay the foundation of local churches in places such as North and South America, Africa, Japan, India, the Philippines, and China.

Augustinians in China

Roman Catholicism was able to gain a foothold in late imperial China due in part to the efforts of some Spanish Augustinian friars. Jerónimo Marín, OSA, and Martín de Rada, OSA, went on an expedition to establish diplomatic and trade relations with the Wanli emperor of the Ming dynasty in 1575. They were followed by Álvaro de Benavente, OSA, and Juan Nicolás de Rivera, OSA, who established the foundations of the Order's mission in Guangdong province on the southeastern coast of China and promoted a policy of accommodating Augustine's teaching for Chinese Catholics. The Spanish Augustinians were active in Zhaoqing, Nanxiong, and some other districts in Guangdong province.³⁴

Translated biographies of and literary works by Augustine, notably *Confessions* and *The City of God*, convinced many Chinese literati that their beliefs were in harmony with Christianity; Confucianism and Christianity complement each other. Through the preachings of the missionaries, Augustine's life and thought inspired many Confucians to

embrace Christianity. Augustine's experience with Manichaeism and his conversion provided an additional source to convince the Chinese to abandon their superstitious beliefs.³⁵

Unfortunately, the success of the Augustinian mission was cut short by the Chinese Rites Controversy, which finally led in 1708 to imperial expulsion orders against European missionaries.³⁶ Having lost imperial protection, the Augustinians were forced to withdraw from China. Portuguese Augustinians continued to serve in Macau, a Portuguese enclave, until 1712.³⁷ Only in the latter half of the nineteenth century, following the defeat of Qing forces in the Opium War (1839-41), were Christian missionaries permitted to return to China.

On August 12, 1879, Pope Leo XIII, through the *Breve ex debito Pastoralis Officii*, entrusted the Augustinians of the Province of the Most Holy Name of Jesus of the Philippines with the Mission of Northern Hunan in China. Historical records show that the Augustinians successfully established mission stations throughout the province, with a significant presence in Changde, Lixian, and Yueyang. Due to the missionaries' efforts and the dedication of the faithful in Northern Hunan, the mission was elevated to the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Hunan on September 19, 1879. This later became the Apostolic Vicariate of Changde on December 3, 1924, and eventually, on April 11, 1946, the Diocese of Changde under the Ecclesiastical Province of Changsha.³⁸

From 1885 to 1928, the Augustinians in China baptized 63,829 local Chinese, administered the Sacrament of Confirmation to 22,847 individuals, and performed the Sacrament of Reconciliation 647,090 times. In addition, they recorded 2,555 weddings, 33,440 deaths, and 252,345 catechumens during this period. These efforts reflect their dedication to spreading and nurturing the Catholic faith in Northern Hunan.³⁹

Several Augustinian friars from the Philippine Province served as local ordinaries before and after 1879, including Álvaro de Benavente, OSA, Elias Suarez, OSA, Saturnino de la Torre Merino, OSA, Luis Perez Perez, OSA, Agustin Gonzalez, OSA, Juvencio Juan Hospital de la Puebla, OSA, Angel Diego Carbajal, OSA, Gerardo Faustino Herrero Garrote, OSA, and Hipolito Martinez Y Martinez, OSA.⁴⁰

In the 1950s, Michael Yang Gaojian, OSA, who had entered the Augustinian Order in 1931 and was ordained a priest in 1938, served as the superior of the Augustinians in China. He was later consecrated as bishop of the Diocese of Changde by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) on October 26, 1958, though without Vatican approval. Similarly, another Chinese Augustinian priest, James Li Shuren, OSA, was consecrated as bishop of Yueyang on the same date, also without papal approval.⁴¹

The Archdiocese of Changsha is currently administered by Archbishop Methodius Qu Ailin, who is approved by the Vatican and recognized by the Chinese government. He was also appointed as the apostolic administrator of all other ecclesiastical territories in the province, namely Baoqing, Changde, Hengzhou, Lizhou, Xiangtan, Yuanling, Yongzhou, and Yuezhou.⁴²

China Congratulates Pope Leo XIV on Election

It is noteworthy that Beijing extended congratulations to Pope Leo XIV upon his election, expressing hope to continue “constructive dialogue” with the Vatican. The Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said, “It is hoped that under the new pope’s leadership, the Vatican will continue to engage in constructive dialogue with China and conduct in-depth communication on international issues of mutual concern.” Lin also expressed China’s hope that both parties could “jointly promote continued improvement of relations and contribute to world peace, stability, and development prosperity.”⁴³

On May 24, 2025, speaking from the window of the Vatican's Apostolic Palace, Leo XIV recalled the World Day of Prayer for the Church in China: "In the churches and shrines of China and throughout the world, prayers were raised to God as a sign of concern and affection for Chinese Catholics and their communion with the universal church." Leo expressed the hope that such prayers will "obtain for them and for us the grace to be strong and joyful witnesses of the Gospel, even in the midst of trials, to always promote peace and harmony."⁴⁴

Leo made his first episcopal appointment of a Chinese bishop on June 5, 2025, naming Bishop Joseph Lin Yuntuan the auxiliary bishop of Fuzhou. He acted swiftly after Beijing's congratulatory message. Officially recognized by the Chinese authorities, this appointment, a continuation of the 2018 Sino-Vatican agreement on episcopal appointments, is aimed at improving relations between the Vatican and China. The Vatican released a statement noting that Lin's ministry had been "recognized" by the Chinese government, calling it "a further fruit of the dialogue between the Holy See and the Chinese Authorities, and is an important step in the journey of communion of the Diocese."⁴⁵

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian affirmed that the jointly recognized appointment demonstrated the smooth implementation of the 2018 agreement, expressing China's willingness to continue cooperation with the Vatican. The new pontiff's action reflected his commitment to reconciliation over confrontation.

On September 2, 2025, Cardinal Stephen Chow, SJ, met Pope Leo XIV at the Vatican for an "in-depth exchange" regarding the Church in China. It was the first important meeting between the bishop of Hong Kong and the pontiff since the Conclave. Cardinal Chow noted, "I was able to share with him my views on the life of the Church... in China and Hong Kong."⁴⁶ This dialogue helped the pope gain a broader understanding of the current state of Sino-Vatican relations.

Leo XIV has consistently demonstrated an openness to learning about the Church in China and to listening to different perspectives. Cardinal Chow expressed gratitude for the opportunity to provide insights from various sources, enriching the pope's understanding of China. Leo XIV was not entirely unaware of the situation of the Church in China even before his election. As Prior General of the Augustinians, he had visited the mainland once. Chow is confident that Leo XIV will continue the direction set by Pope Francis, recognizing the importance of dialogue between the Holy See and Chinese authorities.⁴⁷

Having a "missionary heart" means that Leo XIV will continue the good works of his predecessors and build upon the foundations laid down by Pope Francis, such as synodality, dialogue, and bridge-building, sharing the joy of the Gospel, caring for migrants and refugees, and visiting local churches throughout the world. On May 10, 2025, Leo prayed at the tomb of Pope Francis in the Basilica of St. Mary Major, Rome; later, on that same day, he told the cardinals assembled, "Let us take up this precious legacy and continue on the journey."⁴⁸

Footsteps of Francis

During the welcome ceremony for the 2023 World Youth Day, Pope Francis spoke to some 500,000 young people in Lisbon, Portugal. He told them, "In the church, there is space for everyone, and when there isn't, please, let's work so that there is—also for who makes mistakes, for who falls, for who it is difficult." He led them in chanting, "Everyone, everyone, everyone," and "*Todos, todos, todos*" rippled through the crowd. "That is the church," Francis said. "The mother of all; there is room for all."⁴⁹

In his first address after his election as pontiff, Leo XIV said:

Together, we must look for ways to be a missionary Church, a Church that builds bridges and encourages dialogue, a Church ever open to welcoming, like this

Square with its open arms, all those who are in need of our charity, our presence, our readiness to dialogue and our love.

To all of you, brothers and sisters in Rome, in Italy, throughout the world: we want to be a synodal Church, a Church that moves forward, a Church that always seeks peace, that always seeks charity, that always seeks to be close above all to those who are suffering.⁵⁰

This is a clear sign that the new pontiff is following in the footsteps of Pope Francis by calling for a “synodal Church,” open to all. A synodal Church is characterized by listening, dialogue, and communal discernment, guided by the Holy Spirit. It emphasizes participation and collaboration between clergy and laity. It is a missionary Church, actively engaging with the hopes and struggles of people in the peripheries.

During his first public Mass as pontiff on May 9, 2025, Leo XIV implored his clergy to “make oneself small” to glorify Christ. Sounding very much like Pope Francis, Leo called for a commitment to “move aside so that Christ may remain, to make oneself small so that he may be known and glorified, to spend oneself to the utmost so that all may have the opportunity to know and love him.”⁵¹

On May 10, 2025, two days after his election as pope, Leo XIV reminded his fellow cardinals that Francis had “masterfully and concretely set forth” an ecclesiology in his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. From this text, Leo highlighted several fundamental points:

...the return to the primacy of Christ in proclamation;
the missionary conversion of the entire Christian community; growth in collegiality and synodality;
attention to the *sensus fidei*, especially in its most

authentic and inclusive forms, such as popular piety; loving care for the least and the rejected; courageous and trusting dialogue with the contemporary world in its various components and realities.⁵²

First, the “primacy of Christ in proclamation” means living and sharing one’s faith experience. Second, “missionary conversion” calls the community to enable others to encounter Christ through acts of mercy. Third, “growth in collegiality and synodality” emphasizes co-responsibility for the life of the Church, a way for the Church to be closer to the people. Fourth, “attention to the *sensus fidei*” means taking the people seriously, valuing their cultures and traditions. Fifth, “loving care for the least and the rejected” refers to the Church’s preferential option for the poor expressed in concrete actions. Finally, “courageous and trusting dialogue with the contemporary world” calls the Church to face modern challenges of the world rather than retreat from them.⁵³

The pontiff proclaimed that these principles have always inspired and guided the life and activity of the Church. God reveals himself as the merciful Father in these beautiful values and continues to do so in Jesus Christ, “the ultimate hope of all who sincerely seek truth, justice, peace, and fraternity.”⁵⁴ It is along this path that Leo XIV is called to continue. On August 22, 2025, Pope Leo XIV invited believers to be united in prayer and fasting for peace, calling for a “disarmed and disarming peace” in all places torn by armed conflict.

In every such dialogue, we can rest assured that Pope Leo XIV will put into practice what St. Augustine himself is said to have mentioned in a sermon, namely, “Do not have your heart in your ears, but your ears in your heart.” Indeed, the pope on August 29, 2025 repeated these words in a video message to the Augustinian Province of St. Thomas of Villanova.⁵⁵

Sino-Vatican Relations

In the specific context of the Sino-Vatican Provisional Agreement on the appointment of bishops, Pope Leo is positively affirming and upholding the Agreement. At the same time, he is “also in constant dialogue with various Chinese people on both sides of some of the issues at stake.” This much is clear from his interview with American journalist Elise Allen, contained in the recently published book *León XIV: Ciudadano del mundo, misionero del siglo XXI* [*Leo XIV: Citizen of the World, Missionary of the 21st Century*].⁵⁶

Commenting on the interview, AsiaNews editorial director Father Giani Criveller observed that Pope Leo is listening to different people who think differently; the pontiff’s purpose is “to better understand how the Church can continue its mission, respecting both the culture and the political issues that are obviously of great importance, but also respecting a significant group of Chinese Catholics who for many years have experienced some form of oppression or difficulty in living their faith freely and without taking sides.”⁵⁷ This is especially sensitive as this latter group has felt in recent years—rightly or wrongly—that they have not been listened to.

In Augustinian theology, the challenges arising from the “intermingling” between the Two Cities are never easy to resolve. Progress is often difficult, provisional, and even painful. The nature of their relationship requires, among other things, continuous discernment and dialogue. Sino-Vatican diplomacy, therefore, does not seek to erase the fundamental differences between the spiritual mission of the Holy See and the political sovereignty of the Chinese state. Instead, it seeks to manage their intermingling respectfully—to minimize conflict, allowing the Church in China the freedom of worship, while assuring the State that its sovereignty and broader social stability are not threatened.

Indeed, several key passages of Augustine's *City of God* (mainly in Books 9, 5, and 1) explain why and how all should collaborate in pursuit of the "social goods" of "the Earthly City" even though they are temporal and limited. The goods of civic, moral, and social order, including human law and human justice, friendship and family, are genuine and providential and not to be neglected or "despised."⁵⁸ Such goods, which call for earnest pragmatic cooperation, are necessary to the maintenance of what Augustine calls "civil peace" which can and should be transformed into heavenly peace when rightly ordered with God as its final end:

The peace of the city (*pax civitatis*) is the well-ordered concord of citizens regarding commanding and obeying; the peace of the heavenly city is a perfectly ordered and perfectly concordant fellowship in enjoyment of God and one another in God. The peace of all things is the tranquility or order.⁵⁹

The Legacy of Integral Ecology: Seeds of Peace and Hope

On July 9, 2025, Pope Leo celebrated the inaugural special "Mass for the Care of Creation" as part of the events marking the tenth anniversary of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*. He delivered a homily unequivocally reaffirming, with renewed urgency, the need to heed "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" as a single cry,⁶⁰ stressing that the problems to be addressed are real and multifaceted, including but going beyond climate change.

In a message entitled "Seeds of Peace and Hope," which had been released earlier on June 30, 2025 and was published on September 1, 2025 for the tenth World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, Pope Leo spoke of "care for creation" as an "expression of our faith and humanity" and stated that we must work for "environmental justice" that ensures that development and progress never come at the expense of the poor or the planet.⁶¹ A few days later, on September 5, he officially opened the Borgo *Laudato Si'* project at Castel Gandolfo, the papal

summer residence. This 55-hectare educational and ecological center, begun by Pope Francis, was described by Pope Leo as a “tangible model for ecological conversion.”⁶²

True to the Augustinian way of wisdom, Pope Leo teaches that this conversion must involve a return to the heart, “the place where external reality has the greatest impact, where the deepest searching takes place, where the most authentic desires are discovered, where one’s ultimate identity is found, and where decisions are formed.”⁶³

It requires lifestyle transformation and systemic change; moving from mere data collection to caring; from words to action.

Whilst all this is in continuity with Pope Francis’ catechesis, Pope Leo has brought a new tone to the ecological conversation, positioning environmental stewardship as essential to Christian discipleship and the covenantal relationship between God and human beings, his creatures. He sees the ecological crisis as fundamentally caused by “the rupture of relationships—with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth—resulting from sin.”⁶⁴ This leads some commentators to describe Leo’s teaching as a “theological re-calibration” of the Church’s ecological discourse, rooting it in the traditional categories of sin, conversion, and redemption.⁶⁵ In that sense, they see his approach as theocentric rather than merely anthropocentric or geocentric.

Let there be no misunderstanding. God is not in competition with humanity. As St. Irenaeus said, “The Glory of God is man fully alive!” To Leo XIV, as it was to Pope Francis, integral human development (IHD) is to the glory of God and for the good of humanity. Moreover, wedded as it is to integral ecology, IHD should be seen not as an anthropocentric threat to but as the co-flourishing of nature as a whole (of which human beings form an integral part).⁶⁶ It leads to the building up of an integral ecological civilization which Pope Francis, citing Paul VI, called “a civilization of love.”⁶⁷

Dilexi Te: On the Love of Christ for the Poor

By way of closing remarks, it would be appropriate to say something about Pope Leo XIV's Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te* ("I have loved you," from Revelation 3:9).⁶⁸ This was his first major teaching document. It was signed on October 4, 2025 on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi and officially released on October 9, 2025, the feast day of Saint John Henry Newman. Pope Leo completed the draft begun by Pope Francis, addressing the Exhortation to "All Christians." Its title deliberately echoes that of Pope Francis' encyclical *Dilexit Nos* ("He loved us," from Romans 8:37 and 1 John 4:10) on the human and divine love of the heart of Jesus Christ.⁶⁹

Pope Leo reaffirms that preferential love for the poor is at the heart of authentic faith but deepens its theological foundation and updates its praxis. It re-centers Catholic social teaching on the Incarnation: It is God's choice to enter poverty in Christ which is at the source of love for the poor and explains why the Church's action for justice and mercy is essentially Christological rather than merely sociological. It exhorts the faithful to reimagine the Church as a Church of the poor and for the poor, identifying itself not with the rich and powerful but with the weak and marginalized.⁷⁰

The Exhortation calls attention to multiple forms of poverty both old and new—material, spiritual, cultural and ecological, including loneliness, digital disconnection, and environmental degradation.⁷¹ It integrates two dimensions of love, "that of charity, expressed in immediate help to those in need, and that of the transformation of social structures which generate injustice."⁷² Love for the poor is *preferential*; it is not an exclusive, discriminatory option against other groups.⁷³ Pope Leo sees the preferential choice for the poor not simply as a moral imperative but as a source of "extraordinary renewal both for the Church and for society, if we can only set ourselves free of our self-centeredness and open our ears to their cry."⁷⁴

The Roman Catholic Church is now led by Pope Leo XIV—lion by name, pastor by nature. May the biblical lion's traits of divine choice, steadfastness, leadership, and protection shine in him. May he stand unshaken amid today's turmoil like Daniel in the den, roaring not with violence but with peace.

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