



ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

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Pope Leo XIV: The Dawn of a New Papacy

N.B.: This is Christopher's prepared text. His additional remarks, asides, and other additional material will be added shortly.



On the morning of August 21st, I got up early and went for a run

along Rome's Tiber River,

I was tired not just from covering Holy Week and Easter, but from the last three months.

Ever since Pope Francis entered the hospital on February 14th, it felt a bit like Groundhog Day around the Vatican:

- 8:00 AM message saying Pope was alive
- Noontime briefing
- 7:00 PM briefing, doctors
- Write a story, maybe do some television, eat a bite of dinner, go to bed and repeat.

But when Pope Francis was discharged from the hospital on March 23rd we got a bit of reprieve his doctor said they expected him to make a full recovery talk of a trip to Turkey in late May that was still under consideration he started making surprise public appearances, including with King Charles and Queen Camilla, and a trip to a Roman prison on Holy Thursday.

It seemed things were improving. But then, Easter Sunday came around.

- JD Vance meeting
- Urbi et orbi
- Popemobile

On Sunday evening. I asked the senior Vatican official about the Pope:

- Good days and bad days.

This played over and over again in my mind as I was out on my run. But I'll admit, I wanted to lean into the good news. May the 30th was to be my last day on the job. I had already announced that I was leaving Rome to return to the United states to join Georgetown. On the run I distracted myself thinking about the Roman restaurants I wanted to visit before leaving town and the parties I wanted to organize for myself.

Pasquetta - Easter Monday.

Umbria.

The first fears of many became clear when the brief streaming video began. The grim expressions on the faces of the four prelates cast with sharing the news of the pope's death told the story before I could even turn up the volume on my computer.

Cardinal Kevin Farrell began the announcement of the pope's death by telling the world that Francis had "returned to the House of the Father."

The news came as a shock, but not necessarily as a complete surprise.

"His entire life was dedicated to the servants of the Lord and his Church," Farrell said. "He taught us to live the values of the Gospel with fidelity courage and universal love, especially in favor of the poorest and most marginalized."

Motorino ride back to the Vatican for the busiest month of life.

Now, most Americans have gotten used to hearing that "this next presidential election is the most important in the history of the country," but the same cannot exactly be said of papal elections which go back two millennia. But before the 133 Cardinals enter the Sistine Chapel on May 7, several had to be told they believed that the conclave of 2025 might be the most important in at least 60 years.

I opened my book with a comparison to the Second Vatican Council and Pope John XXIII's death of stomach cancer on June 3, 1963.

Just one year earlier, Pope John had presided over the opening of the Second Vatican Council, a landmark event in the history of Catholicism. This council promised to open up the Church to the modern world. To give this ambitious project context:

- The war in Vietnam had been grinding on for nearly a decade at that point,
- Martin Luther King was leading the crusade for civil rights in the United States,
- And the threat of nuclear destruction loomed large,
- The church was wrestling with the existential question of what role it was to play in this rapidly changing world.

When the council was announced on January 25, 1959, the news sent shockwaves through Rome and beyond. Councils are rare in life of the Church. At the time of what will be called Vatican II, there had only been only 20 previous councils - and each of them was marked by great promise and great trepidation.

Speaking to nearly almost 2,500 bishops from all over the world at the start of the council in 1962, Pope John said it was a time for the Church to look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world, which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate. While many of the past councils had been inward looking - often concerned with suppressing potential heresies that had risen in Catholic life had been looking inward- the Second Vatican Council was decidedly outward facing.

As one observer wrote after the first session, "I hadn't realized that anything like this existed. I thought the Roman Catholic Church was a very closed, complacent, sectarian body that had nothing to learn from anybody else. I know that this is no longer accurate, The whole atmosphere is so different that it is really a miracle."

All of that was at stake following the death of Pope John early in the early summer of 1963. Would the cardinals elect a new pope who would push ahead with the council, as well as the reforms that it had set in motion? Or would they reverse course, afraid of the possibility that decades and even centuries of tradition could be undone? The conclave of 1963 would challenge all of this,

leading to the *New York Times* to declare that “in modern times there has never been a papal election so important as that which starts in Rome tomorrow.”

On June 21, 1962, when Giovanni Battista Montini emerged from the conclave, taking the name Pope Paul VI, it sent a signal that the reform set in motion by John XXIII would continue. The former cardinal of Milan had been an ally of John XXIII, though different in disposition—John XXIII had a winsome, extroverted, sometimes even comical personality compared to the more sober and contemplative Paul VI—Montini—had been deeply engaged in the first session of the council. Yet despite his support of the larger project, he knew the council would lead to a reckoning for the global institution. In fact, the night the council was first announced, Cardinal Montini called a friend and is said to have said of Pope John, “This holy old boy doesn't realize what a hornet's nest he's stirring up!”

By the end of the Francis papacy, some of the pope's own cardinals had begun to criticize it in similar terms, sometimes using even more pointed descriptions. Australian Cardinal George Pell, before his own death in 2023, had penned a secret memo that labeled the Francis papacy a “catastrophe,” and was actively promoting candidates who would bring back an era of law and order to the Vatican's governance. And then there was the former head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, German Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, who went even further in his public criticisms, implying that Francis might have drifted into heresy for allowing the priest to offer blessings to couples in same sex unions.

Yet, I would argue that for Francis, his entire papacy could be seen as trying - albeit 50 years later - to implement the reforms of the council initiated by his predecessor popes John XXIII and Paul VI, both of whom he would go on to be canonized during his papacy.

The Second Vatican Council had unleashed tremendous change in the life of the Church. Among its landmark reforms were the greater participation of the Catholic laity in the life of the Church, the start of a new era in the Catholic Church's relationship with other religions, and a deepening commitment to religious liberty and pluralism. The council explicitly called for a style of governance that was meant to be more collegial; and above all, the council committed the Church to a more engaged and open to the world around it. And yet, the council's embrace of these initiatives had been sluggish, meant as they were with internal resistance and two popes who sustained a narrow

understanding of the council's aims. In his first major document as pope in 2013, Francis turned to the council and anchored his own papacy in a call for an “ecclesial conversion as openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ.”

In the 12 years that followed, Francis pursued that vision by radically reorienting the Church's priorities. He demonstrated his commitment to this reorientation by several ways:

- By insisting that the Church focus less on sexual ethics;
- While at the same time showing its equal commitment to the needs of migrants and refugees and those facing environmental disasters;
- By putting women into higher ranking positions of power in the Vatican for the first time ever;
- By beginning to dismantle the papal court that had long defined the institution;
- And by launching a global synodal process meant to invite Catholics around the world to bring their joys and anxieties with the Church, so that the Church might find a better way to listen to them.

Outside the Church, these changes were overwhelmingly greeted with tremendous reception. Like Pope John XXIII, Francis was named *Time Magazine's* “Person of the year 2013” in 2013, which hailed him as “The people pope” for his courage into changing the often archaic and antiquated institution.

Inside the Church, a hornet's nest had been rattled. This past May, when the cardinals from around the world gathered to elect Francis' successor, they were effectively facing a referendum on - as they did 60 years earlier - whether to continue down this path.

Following the death of a pope, cardinals - whose main job is to elect a Pope - all began to descend on Rome. It was the largest and most diverse conclave in history with over 70 countries represented. Eighty percent of the men had never participated in a conclave before. Immediately, the spotlight began to fall on a few leading candidates, known as *papabile* in Italian,

- Parolin
- Tagle
- Grech
- Aveline

- Provost.

When Cardinal Robert McElroy, the now-archbishop of Washington D.C., was asked in 2022 about the possibility of an American being elected Pope, he bluntly dismissed the idea.

“I don't think an American should be pope.” he said in the in an interview. “I would oppose any American being elected.”

“The United States,” he said, “has too much power in the world, and an American being elected to the papacy would only add to that, and diminish the global perspective the head of the world's 1.4 billion Catholic needs in governing its universal Church.”

McElroy's position has historically been widely shared by members of the College of Cardinals, the elite group of churchmen tasked with selecting the next pope. In 1899 Pope Leo XIII even wrote a letter warning of the dangers of “Americanism,”— particularly expressed through an overzealous emphasis on individual liberty—as a potential heresy.

Those Cardinals still fearful of such unorthodoxy likely we're unnerved by the behavior of U.S. President Donald Trump, just days before the conclave and freshly back home from the funeral of Pope Francis, when he posted an AI image of himself on social media dressed as the pope. The image was later shared by the official White House account. When asked by reporter if he had any thoughts about who should be elected next he joked, “I'd like to be.”

He then went on to suggest that “we have a cardinal that happens to be out of a place called New York who was very good; so we'll see what happens.”

Now, with all due respect to New York's NY's backslapping, hot dog loving, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who offered prayers at both of Trump's inaugurals, was not a contender in this looming conclave. But both he and Trump our profiles of exactly the sort of American style pope that many other cardinals outside of the United states would fear.

Despite having three non-Italian pontiffs in a row—a Pole, a German and an Argentine— the conventional wisdom has been that tapping someone from the world's largest superpower to head the world's smallest state would be a bridge too far.

But these are unconventional times. On May 7th the day the cardinals entered the conclave, I publish a piece in *Foreign Policy Magazine*, suggesting that perhaps it's precisely because of Trump that the idea of an American pope became a bit more palatable among the men asked with electing the next pope.

Just weeks before the conclave, when J.D. Vance was in Rome for Easter, Italian Cardinal Pietro Parolin lamented that the United States no longer seems interested in engaging the sort of multilateralism that has long defined the Vatican's approach to foreign policy.

He told the Italian daily, *La Repubblica*, that "it is clear that the current U.S. administration's approach is very different from we are used to and, especially in the West, from what we have relied on for many years."

Perhaps this changing world order, I argued, fueled by an increased American isolationism in disregard for the multinationalism that the Vatican has helped buttress since the end of the Second World War, has put the new Trump administration on a potential collision course with the Vatican, along with many other traditional allies.

As the cardinals met in Rome for their closed-door meetings in the lead up to the conclave, they not only discuss the internal needs of the Catholic Church, but many of them were asking what kind of leader they wanted to navigate this global realignment.

That's when the name Cardinal Robert Prevost began to surface and then reverberate around the room.

Prevost, 69, was the head of the powerful Vatican office that identifies potential bishops around the world. The Chicago born Prevost has spent the bulk of his adult life in Italy and Peru. As the former Augustinian religious leader that operates in nearly fifty countries around the globe, he had extensive experience and exposure among many of the world's cardinals responsible for electing the next pope. He has spent much of his life outside of the United States, is a polyglot which made him able to communicate with almost all of the cardinals, and he was deeply invested in the vision of what Pope Francis called "a better kind of politics"—one that prioritizes concern for the common good over any one particular country's borders.

Back in 2022, when Cardinal McElroy was discussing the prospects of an American pope, he noted that foreign travels allow one to see all of the different perspectives, and the world looks quite different from our American reference points.

He said, “that doesn't mean our reference points are wrong,” he added, “but it means those wider perspectives need to be added to it.”

Yet with the ascendancy of Trumpism, that perspective seems to be shrinking. Could someone from the United States take charge of the last absolute monarchy in the world, the papacy? For many people it seemed wildly counterintuitive. Others, however, thought that someone who could use that bully pulpit of the papacy to counter other bullies would be a potential game changer.

In an interview two years before he became pope, Cardinal Prevost said that a Catholic bishop is “not supposed to be a little prince sitting in his kingdom” but instead is “called authentically to be humble, to be close to the people he serves, to walk them to walk with them, to suffer with them.”

In working on my book on the election of Pope Leo, many of the men who went into the Sistine Chapel told me that they believe this is the type of leadership that could draw a stark contrast from what is being witnessed elsewhere on the world stage.

When white smoke appeared on the afternoon of May 8th, I was on set with NBC and MSNBC. We were on the rooftop of the Augustinianum, the headquarters of the Augustinian order, where, coincidentally, Robert Prevost lived and worked for ten years as the head of the order, and where up till then, the day before the conclave began, he still visited for morning mass and lunch each day.

There's about a full hour of time to fill between the white smoke and the time the new pope appears on the balcony; so it's full of speculation. The adrenaline is running high. One of the folks on the set was Bishop Robert Barron, the media savvy founder of *Word on Fire* and bishop of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota. He said to me—off camera—that after such a quick election he thought it had to be Cardinal Parolin. He then asked me who I thought it would be. When I said I believed it was Prevost, he laughed at me and dismissed the idea as pure fantasy that only Vatican watchers like myself could dream up.

Eventually, the moment we all had been waiting for happened. The cardinal deacon, Cardinal Mamberti, appeared to announce the words “*Habemus Papam.*”

Now, I'm lousy at Latin, but I have been studying the Latin names of the leading candidates. When I heard the words *Roberto Franciscum*, I smiled and felt a bit vindicated. Everyone on the set began scrambling unsure of who it was. I yelled, “It's the American.”—maybe I yelled something slightly more colorful that I shouldn't repeat here—and that's why when they realized what was happening and that history was being made.

A few minutes later, there he stood on the balcony—no longer as Cardinal Prevost, a man whom I had gotten to know two years earlier, but as our new pope, Pope Leo XIV.

He delivered a speech that he had handwritten pretty quickly right after he was elected, but in less than 500 words, Leo gave us an early blueprint of what we can expect in the years ahead.

- Peace (9 times)
- A Church that is missionary, bridge building and open to all (*totus, totus, totus*)
- A Church that is synodal, a sharp contrast to Cardinal Re.

I had long thought and believed that the conclave that followed the Francis pontificate would largely be a referendum on synodality.

There are three camps among the College of Cardinals:

- those who believed Francis' pastoral priorities poor marginalized but wanted to abandon synodality;
- those who appreciated synodality as a form of outreach but not as the constitutive dimension of the church;
- *Avanti* i.e., to go forward- the challenge was how to bring the whole church along with it the big challenge for the conclave was that they had to convert each other to synodality without Francis there was no enforcing figure to decide whether to make this their own.

The election of Leo is a victory for the *avanti* camp.

A few days after the conclave, New York's Cardinal Dolan was asked about the significance of Pope Leo's being from the United States.

"I don't think the fact that Cardinal Prevost was from the United States had much weight," he told reporters. "It should not startle us that we should look to Pope Leo as a bridge-builder. That's what the word Latin word 'pontiff' means."

Dolan continued, "Will he want to build bridges with Donald Trump? I suppose. But he would want to build bridges with the leader of every nation. I don't think at all that my brother cardinals would have thought of him as a counterweight to any one person."

Washington's Cardinal McElroy, who had previously sought to downplay such a possibility, also expressed surprise: "I think the impact of him being an American was of him being an American was almost negligible to the deliberations of the conclave. Surprisingly, so for me," he said.

Cardinal Wilton Gregory, McElroy's predecessor in the nation's capital and also a native son of Chicago, made reporters laugh when he added that the conclave was not a continuation of the American political election cycle.

"It wasn't an election conclave," Gregory said, "It was a desire to strengthen the Christian faith among God's people."

So, what might this mean for the future of the Leo papacy?

Like popes before him, Leo will be deeply committed to putting the defense of human dignity at the center of his papacy, not as a political matter, but because it's what the Gospel requires.

Yet, this will at times have political consequences, and he will not be shy about his using his voice to defend human dignity and promote the common good when necessary.

As to those gathered in this room know firsthand, years before Leo's election, Francis had become the world's leading advocate for migrants.

In February, just months before his death, Francis sent a nearly unprecedented letter to U.S. bishops telling them to stand united in opposition to Trump's plans to carry out mass deportations. It's almost certain the Cardinal Prevost would have had a hand in the matter, as well as a matter of protocol, a letter going to the bishops of a particular country would have certainly included the involvement of the Vatican office that oversees them and that was headed by his office.

The letter included a response to the U.S. Vice President, J.D. Vance, a recent Catholic convert, who had invoked Catholic theology to defend the administration's migrant crackdown.

Coincidentally, just months before a member of the order ascended to the papacy, Vance appealed to the Augustinian concept of "*ordo amoris*" to support the notion that the United States, the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, had little obligation to care for migrants.

"You love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country." Vance said in an interview with Fox News, "And then after that, you can focus and prioritize on the rest of the world."

Francis—while not referring to Vance explicitly by name—was having none of it.

The true *ordo amoris* that must be promoted is that we discover by meditating constantly on the parable of the 'Good Samaritan,' that is while meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception," Francis wrote in his letter to the U.S. bishops.

That episode led to Cardinal Prevost posting on his social media, "J.D. Vance is wrong: Jesus doesn't ask us to rank our love for others," the headline went from linked article in my former newspaper, the *National Catholic Reporter*.

Upon realizing this, right after Leo's election as pope, one prominent Trump supporter immediately dismissed Leo as a "woke, a Marxist pope," a refrain that was sadly echoed a lot in certain days after his election. Steve Bannon, the talk show host and former Trump White House adviser, didn't hesitate to predict that there is "definitely going to be friction" between the new pope and the president.

Leo may have spent the majority of his life outside of the United States what unfortunate it seems he will not be able to outrun the polarization that has poisoned the Church in his homeland. As pope he is now poised to remind the world that the Church's social teaching doesn't map well into the American political landscape. A pope who opposes abortion and speaks out on behalf of immigrants of migrants and victims of climate change, will—in the words of one of his Augustinian conferees that I spoke with after his election—"greatly please and occasionally disappoint conservatives and will greatly please and occasionally disappoint liberals."

Leo's personality is better suited for bridge building:

- Removed from some of the politics of this country
- A brother who is mega so he understands the divides within our own family pews, etc.
- Bridge building moment as an American Pope (he can't be dismissed as not understanding us)
- Never been a member of the USCCB.
- When he speaks out on issues in the US it will have particular resonance.

November will be a real test for the U.S. bishops.

During his opening speech the night of his election, Leo said he had a dream of a united Church searching all together for peace and justice, working together as women and men faithful to Jesus Christ without fear, proclaiming Christ, to be missionaries, faithful to the Gospel."

For his brother Augustinian in Pennsylvania, Fr. Riley, "that's the *libretto*."

"We kind of know the playbook if you're an Augustinian," he said. "He's giving us a foundation to talk to each other."

That's the opportunity in the invitation that Leo - now history's first Pope in this country is offering the Church and the world. Now, we have to decide how we will respond.