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People react at the Cathedral of St. Mary in Chiclayo, Peru, May 8, 2025, the day Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost was elected pope. He chose the papal name Leo XIV. As an Augustinian priest, then-Father Prevost spent many years as a missionary in Peru. (OSV News photo/Reuters/Sebastian Castaneda)



by Céire Kealty

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In some ways, it feels imprudent to speculate about the future work of the new pope. And yet, I can't help but wonder about the significance of his chosen name: Leo. I anticipate he'll devote his attention to a variety of social concerns. His previous comments on social media, his time as a bishop in Peru, and even his former university affiliation (Go Wildcats!) support this assumption. But knowing the weight of a name, I pray that Pope Leo XIV will live into his choice and be lionhearted on labor justice.

This prayer isn't fickle; it's borne from the legacy of the Leo who preceded him.

Leo XIV's name harkens back to Pope Leo XIII, whose pontificate coincided with the startling changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. During this period, the invention of steam-powered machinery and other technologies transformed production methods in Europe. As factories became more efficient, traditional producers struggled to compete. As a result, traditional laborers departed from their rural villages to cities to secure work in these factories. There, they endured exploitative conditions and were poorly compensated. Workers who attempted to advocate, organize and unionize faced resistance from factory owners and the wealthy, toward whom the scales of justice were unfairly tipped.

Leo XIII recognized that these injustices warranted a response, and in 1891, he published the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor). In this document, Leo XIII powerfully condemned the social dysfunctions wrought by industrialization. He offered critiques of capitalism and socialism and charted theologically informed paths forward for the working poor. Leo XIII advocated for the organization of property around the common good (§36), a just wage for workers (§34), labor unions (which he referred to as worker associations) (§69) and more.

Rerum Novarum is considered a foundational document of Catholic social teaching. It reflects ideas integral to the faith, including the preferential option for the poor (§24) and the dignity of the human person (§20).

Leo XIII's successors built upon *Rerum Novarum* through additional encyclicals that expanded Catholic social teaching perspectives. Yet Leo's original words still

resonate in 2025, when worker exploitation and union suppression persist and where contemporary "robber barons" gleefully plunder the working class. His exclamation that misusing people as "though they were things in the pursuit of gain, or to value them solely for their physical powers — that is truly shameful and inhuman" powerfully condemns the dehumanization endured by suffering laborers across the globe (§20).



Pope Leo XIII is depicted in this official Vatican portrait. He laid the foundation for modern Catholic social teaching with his landmark 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, addressing the rights and dignity of workers in the face of industrialization. (OSV News photo/Library of Congress)

Could I be so bold as to hope that Leo XIV might emulate his predecessor and promulgate his own encyclical on the current global labor landscape? It certainly is my hope.

The church has much to offer a world weary from the dehumanizing wiles of worker exploitation. Ours is a world where workers throughout the Global South endure terrible conditions to meet corporate quotas and satisfy consumer appetites for the newest phone or handbag or shirt. Ours is a world where corporations coolly sacrificed frontline workers in a global pandemic, shifting death, debility and other hardships onto the most vulnerable. Ours is a world where dreams of financial stability are an achievable reality for the few and just a dream for many. Ours is a world of "gigification," where gig labor and contracted jobs abound as pension-guaranteed jobs disappear from sight. Ours is a world where governing bodies (like the current U.S. administration) invest billions into AI infrastructure while those technologies replace human workers, threaten jobs and entire industries, and more.

And, if I may echo the words of the late Pope Francis, ours is a world of globalized indifference, where we so easily shrug off the injuries endured by our neighbors so we can better cope with the injuries we've accumulated on our own journeys. We may feel materially richer this way, but we are made spiritually poorer in the process.

If I'm honest, my prayer for Leo XIV is personal. Having navigated the U.S. job market for the last twelve months and heard from peers about how frustrating and devastating the process has been to secure gainful employment, I find myself returning to the church for respite.

I am eager for the words of our new pope to breathe life into this dismaying situation. I'm also eager to see how Leo XIV might address this situation, given his own experiences. How might Leo XIV's time as bishop of Chiclayo in Peru inform his approach to labor justice and the world's many wounds? For now, I can only wait and see.

I had (and still have) reservations about a U.S. pope. However, I'm choosing to believe his name reveals his trajectory. I'm hoping and praying for a pope who is lionhearted about labor justice — a justice that is fundamental to human society, a justice that overlaps with environmental and planetary health, and a justice that dictates how we treat our neighbors.

My hopes are manifold for Pope Leo XIV, but my prayer is that he will live into his name, bravely and boldly, for the sake of the world and its weary workers.

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