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In this undated image in Peru, Cardinal Robert Prevost spends time with sisters and collaborators. (Courtesy of Sr. Carmen Toledano)



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Two days before the May 7 conclave began, Augustinian Sr. Carmen Toledano texted her religious brother *Monseñor Robert*, whom others called Cardinal Robert Prevost. She was surprised to hear his name in the news as a front-runner for pope and told him the way she saw it, the church needed a person who knew how to break barriers — a unifier, a builder of communion, someone like him.

"His response was, 'We're in God's hands,' something like that," recalled Toledano hours after watching Prevost become Pope Leo XIV.

For decades, Augustinian sisters in Peru like Toledano had a front-row seat to a pope in the making. They traveled with him and saw his work up close in places like Chuquibambilla, one of the most poverty-stricken parts of Peru. They saw the way Prevost moved into action to secure oxygen tanks for the poor who contracted COVID-19 and took the consecrated host to a park in Chiclayo, where he was bishop, to provide spiritual comfort during the pandemic on the feast of Corpus Christi.

"His enthusiasm impressed me," Toledano said. "He had that desire of being close to the poorest. He lived that experience as a gift, a responsibility. ... I saw how comforting he was with the most humble. That was a sign."

Seeing that same man introduced as Pope Leo XIV was a moment she's still trying to wrap her head around.

"This has moved us enormously, not only because of what his mission means, but also because he is a brother we know well," she said in a phone interview with Global Sisters Report.

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Though she is based in Peru, where Leo served, she was at the Monastery of the Conversion in Sotillo de la Adrada, Spain, with more than 40 sisters when white smoke came out of the chimney.

Sisters screamed and cried as they later watched the first Augustinian pope walk out on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica May 8, she said. They have many photos taken with him, have shared sorrows and joys, food, and a life in the search and service of God.

Augustinian Sr. Marlene Quispe of the Monastery of the Incarnation in Lima, Peru, said that as a religious brother, Prevost walked the path toward what St. Augustine of Hippo, the order's founder, wanted: unity.

"He was a man who listened a lot, who helped others discern, whose words were fundamental in creating communion," she said of Prevost. "And he was a true brother."



Augustinian Sr. Marlene Quispe (GSR file photo)

As prior general of the Augustinians from 2001 to 2013, he helped bring out the best in people, particularly in sisters, helping them see what communion could generate, Quispe said.

"For us, Augustinian sisters, he listened a lot and told us not to be afraid of new things and encouraged us to allow the Spirit to guide us," she recalled.

He is well-known and loved in the order's federation, which has communities in Spain, Peru and the United States, Quispe said. He has a reputation for being close to those in the order, a man who follows the will of God, she said.

His love for the church is unconditional, added Toledano, and so is his great love for Peru, where he cemented a belief in being part of a mission of evangelization, to give himself over to serve wherever God calls. Toledano said she remembered when he was appointed prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops in 2023 and he had to leave the country.

"In one of the last conversations I had with him, he said: 'I feel like a missionary and I don't see myself in Rome, but I have prayed and perhaps now what I have to be is a missionary in Rome. There is also a mission to be accomplished there,' " she recalled.

But even as he ascended, he remained close to the order and the sisters. He had plans to visit their monastery in Spain for the final celebrations of its 25th anniversary in September, Toledano said, something that probably won't happen now.

After his papal election, she said she sent him a simple text message, and wonders whether he'll receive it and how or if they will communicate now that he's pope.

"My message was simple because I don't think I can talk to him. What did I say in that message? That I believe that the Holy Spirit, through the church, elected him for that mission and perhaps it is he, as a man of communion, the one the church needs today," she said.



People hold newspapers in Chiclayo, Peru, May 9, 2025, reporting on the election of Pope Leo XIV, who is a dual U.S.-Peruvian citizen. (OSV News/Reuters/Sebastian Castaneda)

As his sisters from the Augustinian order, Toledano said, they have a mission: to take care of him through their prayers and their love — from a distance.

"Because I imagine the loneliness he must now feel even surrounded by so many people," she said, and also facing the enormous responsibility of being pope.

Quispe said she will always remember the special time he spent with the sisters.

"He has shared meals with us, celebrated with us, accompanied us, encouraged us, and that is moving for us, because he has done so in his simplicity, with trust, with prayer," she said.

No matter how close his path kept getting to the top, he never let it go to his head, she added. When he became prefect in 2023, Prevost told them that he was the same as before, "just another brother," knocking on the door and asking if he could

crash at their place when he was nearby, never asking for special treatment.

"He never had any type of pretension," she said.

For Toledano, she is still processing what has happened to her friend.

"And while my sisters in Spain were jumping for joy, I couldn't react. I was sitting there and my reaction was to start crying, overwhelmed when I saw him. I mean, I couldn't believe it," she said. "But something inside me these last few days was telling me, I don't know what. I was overwhelmed when I thought about this possibility."

This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** feature series. View the full series.