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An undated file photo shows Pope John Paul II greeting then-Augustinian Fr. Robert Francis Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV. He became the first U.S. pope in history to be elected pope May 8, 2025, at the Vatican. (OSV News/Augustinian Province of Our Mother of Good Counsel handout via Reuters)



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Augustinian Fr. Giuseppe Caruso recalls a moment of deep uncertainty during his years as an Augustinian friar. He had been facing criticism from one of his superiors so Caruso sought help from Augustinian Fr. Robert Prevost, who was then the superior general of the Augustinians.

" 'Father, I have to worry about everything at this time in my life, but who worries about me?' " he asked the future Pope Leo XIV.

The response was simple but reassuring,

"You may not believe it, but I worry about you," then-Superior Prevost said.

The anecdote is one that Augustinians around the world are remembering about Leo, who was elected as pontiff on May 8 by 133 cardinals after four votes. Leo has held numerous roles in the order that has a global presence, with about 2,500 members in 60 countries. Their missions range from major universities like Villanova University in Pennsylvania to parishes and outreach efforts in Peru, Africa and the Philippines.

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Caruso eventually continued his academic journey within the Augustinians, becoming dean of the Pontifical Patristic Institute Augustinianum in Rome from 2016 to 2024.

That exchange stayed with Caruso, shaping his view of now-Pope Leo XIV as "a very simple, humble, quiet person who has never been full of himself."

With the stunning elevation of Leo, Caruso's reflections take on new significance. He is confident that the same humility and compassion he witnessed will guide Leo's leadership.

"He will be the pope who will take upon himself the responsibility for a church that is traveling at different speeds, a church that is struggling to keep up," Caruso said.

Similar emotions could be found in Chicago, where American Augustinian Fr. Anthony Pizzo is getting used to calling his old classmate Pope Leo XIV.

"I just want to call him Bob," said Pizzo, the prior provincial of the Midwest province of the Augustinas.



Fr. Anthony Pizzo, Provincial of the Midwest Augustinians, poses in a 2024 photo with then-Cardinal Robert Prevost. (OSV News/Augustinian Province of Our Mother of Good Counsel handout via Reuters)

It was in the province of Our Mother of Good Counsel where Prevost began his ministry as an Augustinian priest. Pizzo was a year behind him when they were both students at Villanova, run by the Augustinian order outside Philadelphia since its founding in 1842, and later at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, where they both completed masters of divinity degrees.

"He's a very open guy, very attentive, friendly, respectful," Pizzo said. "I believe he's well balanced on many issues, if not, you know, almost all issues. And he's that way because he's very dedicated to his lifestyle as a priest, one who serves the church, a shepherd, a pastor, and as well as a teacher."

And now, a pope.

Pizzo remained in contact with Prevost over the years as the future Leo moved to Peru, then Rome, then back to Peru and then back to Rome. They spoke by phone a few months back and last texted after the death of Pope Francis.

"I can say this: He was a good friend of Pope Francis," Pizzo said.

Francis was in regular contact with Prevost while he was prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops. Pizzo sees the two papacies as "one flowing into another."

"I see Pope Leo in a very real and practical sense taking on the writings of Pope Francis, his encyclicals, his apostolic letters to heart and to build up on that," Pizzo said.



Then-Bishop Robert Prevost distributes Communion during Mass in Chiclayo, Peru, in this screengrab from a video obtained on social media and released on April 11,

2023. (OSV News/Lambayeque Regional Governor Jorge Perez Flores via Reuters)

Pizzo said Leo is very intelligent, but "he does not allow his intelligence to get in the way of his heart."

Yet he's cordial. "He's also a guy you can sit down with and have a very friendly conversation about almost anything."

Pizzo said his papal name Leo XIV, follows Pope Leo XIII, the 19th-century pope credited with forming the foundation of modern Catholic social teaching with his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

"I can't crawl into the mind of Pope Leo," Pizzo said. "However, knowing him all these years and knowing his deep respect for the social outreach of the church, I see us moving in that direction."

Augustinian Fr. Pasquale Di Lernia, secretary general of the Augustinian congregation, knows Leo as Fr. Robert.

"It is a great surprise, a great joy but also a great responsibility for him, because the ministry he assumes is a high one, it is at the service of the church but also of all humanity," Di Lernia said.

Di Lernia recalled the simple, everyday moments spent with Leo when he was still Fr. Robert working at the bishops' dicastery at the Vatican.

"He would participate in the Eucharist with the community of the general curia of the Augustinians and at the same time in our always very jovial lunches," Di Lernia said.

Di Lernia said he sees opportunity for the order.

"For the order of St. Augustine, this is a great responsibility because the order came into being precisely by the will of the church … with the charism of cultivating interiority, spirituality and the offering of service to the church," he said.

This story appears in the **Looking for Leo in History** and **Pope Leo XIV** feature series.