



Pope Leo XIV, the former Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, waves after walking onto the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican May 8, following his election during the conclave. The first U.S.-born pope and the first Augustinian pope in history, Leo's first public words were "Peace be with you!" (OSV News/Vatican Media)

by NCR Editorial Staff

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

December 15, 2025

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

We start with a simple belief: Every human being possesses a God-given spirit, inherent dignity and rights that can never be exchanged or taken away. This is the foundation on which we stand, the moral clarity from which all our work flows. It influences how we interpret history, understand the church's mission, and identify leaders who respond to the urgency of their time.

This year, that clarity clearly points to Pope Leo XIV, named the Newsmaker of the Year for 2025 by the National Catholic Reporter. His early actions as pope are not just administrative moves; they are moral guiding posts in a world yearning for direction. Amid rising authoritarianism, growing inequality, ecological decline and a disturbing normalization of violence, he offers something rare: a pastor-leader urging the church to reclaim the dignity of every person — not as an abstract idea, but as the core of its public witness.

By honoring him now, we recognize both the hope he has ignited and the tough questions he refuses to avoid. We also acknowledge that his papacy is new — many challenges lie ahead which will test him and define him. And yet we can confidently state that Pope Leo XIV's first seven months have already transformed the global Catholic conversation and signaled a different kind of leadership — humble, dialogical, grounded and unwavering in conscience.

In a divided world, he has become a necessary North Star.

A pope for a fractured time

Leo's election on May 8, 2025 — one of the fastest and most decisive conclaves in history — brought Chicago-born Augustinian missionary Robert Prevost to the papacy amid a time of converging crises: escalating war, severe ecological danger and internal division that has left many Catholics spiritually drained. From his first [public words](#) — "Peace be with you!" — he emphasized his core mission: reconciliation, not rivalry. That simple yet purposeful opening blessing cast his papacy as a peace-focused ministry rooted in Gospel truth rather than diplomatic games.



Pope Leo XIV meets with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the papal villa in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, July 9. "War is never holy," Leo has said. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Since that moment on the balcony, Leo has shown the steady temperament of a calming peacemaker. He called for a ceasefire in Gaza and persistently pushed for renewed negotiations in Ukraine, often repeating a [line](#) that has come to symbolize his vision: "War is never holy; only peace is holy, because it is the singular will of God."

In an era when "realism" is often used to justify moral failure, Leo has resisted that temptation. He has told political leaders that ending war is "a solemn duty before God" — a duty they will one day be held accountable for. His diplomatic language, centered on "reconciliation, justice and truth," has refocused Vatican foreign policy on the Gospel's moral compass. He is reminding a tired global audience that peace is not naivete; it is moral courage.

Moral clarity for the poor

Leo's pastoral heart was not shaped in European chancery offices; it was [molded in the sun-baked neighborhoods of Peru](#), where he lived and served for decades. That foundation energizes his [first teaching document, *Dilexi Te*](#) ("I Have Loved You"), a powerful and necessary critique of what he calls the "dictatorship of inequality." There, he presents a vision of Christian discipleship unwavering in its priorities. He argues that nations should gauge their moral worth not by GDP, but by their closeness to the poor. He plainly states: "We cannot love God unless we identify with the poor." In a global economy that encourages extraction and hides suffering, such language provides a vital dose of Gospel realism.



Pictures of Robert Prevost as a cardinal and as Pope Leo XIV adorn the sacristy in Our Lady of Montserrat Parish in Trujillo, Peru. (NCR photo/Justin McLellan)

By choosing the name "Leo," he calls to mind Pope Leo XIII, who challenged the injustices of the Industrial Revolution. Yet Leo XIV's social concern is clearly 21st century: economic justice and ecological survival are interconnected. He warns that "God will ask us an accounting for our treatment of creation." Within weeks of his election, he announced plans to turn Vatican City into the world's first carbon-neutral state — a bold stand of ethical witness as much as environmental policy. At

a time when powerful leaders dismiss or deny the climate crisis, Leo has set an example grounded in integrity: faith meets science, science meets justice, justice meets survival.

This is moral clarity on the environment — not in slogans, but in action.

Moral clarity on migrants and the displaced

In the sphere of migration — where global cruelty has become normalized — Leo has given equally urgent witness. Drawing on his experience ministering to displaced families in Latin America, he has insisted that migrants possess "spiritual rights." He has pressed governments to allow chaplains into detention centers. And he has spoken forcefully against the political manipulation of vulnerable people.

[Read this next: 6 themes from Pope Leo's 6 months as pope](#)

At a time when immigrant families are used as props, bargaining chips or objects of contempt, Leo's voice stands as a needed reminder: No human being is illegal. Every person is a bearer of sacred worth.

This is moral clarity for our age of borders, walls and hardened hearts.

Moral clarity on justice and integrity within the church

If Leo's global actions draw headlines, his internal reforms may have longer-lasting effects. Rather than stepping back from Pope Francis' renewal, Leo has deepened it.

He has made synodality not a process but an attitude: Synodality is not a program or a campaign, [he said](#), "but the Christ-like willingness to understand and accompany." In that one line, he redefined the church's self-understanding — not as a fortress but as a pilgrim community, porous, listening, open to conversion.



Standing amid the rubble and with the loved ones of people killed behind him, Pope Leo XIV prays at a memorial marking the site of a deadly explosion in 2020 at the port in Beirut Dec. 2. He traveled to Turkey and Lebanon Nov. 27 to Dec. 2, his first international trip as pope. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

He has appointed women to senior curial roles, supported widening pastoral space for LGBTQ Catholics, and strengthened financial integrity through his motu proprio *Coniuncta Cura* ("Shared Responsibility"), tightening ethical investment standards and restructuring oversight systems long in need of reform.

These choices matter because they build trust — and trust is the moral oxygen the church cannot live without.

Moral clarity in an age of technology

Leo XIV has also insisted that the church must confront the digital and artificial intelligence revolutions with seriousness and courage. He [warned](#) that technology without ethical grounding could lead to "forgetting how to recognize and cherish all

that is truly human." In his first addresses to scientists and engineers, he urged the establishment of an international moral framework rooted in the intrinsic worth of individuals.

In a world racing blindly into algorithmic power, this is the sober voice Catholics — and humanity — desperately need.

Continuity with Francis, courage for the future

In many ways, [Leo stands in continuity with Francis](#): the poor remain central, dialogue remains essential, and creation remains sacred. Yet his tone is distinct: less polarizing, less rhetorical, less defensive, more open.



Pope Francis gives the red biretta to new Cardinal Robert Prevost, then the U.S.-born prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, during a consistory for the creation of 21 new cardinals in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Sept. 30. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

He has already lowered the fever of the culture wars. He has reminded Catholics across the ideological spectrum that "[no one should impose his or her own ideas; we](#)

[must all listen to one another](#). No one is excluded; we are all called to participate. No one possesses the whole truth; we must all humbly seek it and seek it together." And he has made it clear that unity is not uniformity — it is the fruit of patient listening, shared suffering and collective courage.

In seven short months, he has reset what authentic Christian leadership looks like.

Why he matters — and why now

In 2025, with democracies wobbling, ecosystems collapsing, and whole populations numbed by division and despair, Pope Leo XIV's emergence has been the most consequential development in Catholic life — and among the most hopeful developments in global public life.

His papacy is still evolving. The road ahead is not clearly marked, not in times like these. Yet he has already become one of the few leaders speaking with the authority that comes from humility, from lived experience, and from unbending fidelity to conscience.

Advertisement

For the National Catholic Reporter — whose vocation has always been to side with truth over power — that makes Leo not just a story, but a sign. A sign that a church weary from scandal and polarization can still rediscover its bearings. A sign that faith rooted in justice is still possible. A sign that the Gospel's moral clarity can still cut through the noise of a troubled world.

For these reasons, NCR names Pope Leo XIV its Newsmaker of 2025.

He reminds us who we are. He reminds us what the church can be. He reminds us what humanity must be, if we are to survive: a community that knows every person bears the image of God — and acts accordingly.

A North Star for a world in turmoil. A pastor for a church in need of healing. A witness of conscience for an age losing its way.

And for this moment, a leader worthy of our attention, our hope and our carefully measured praise.

[Read this next: How we chose Pope Leo XIV as this year's Newsmaker](#)

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec. 19, 2025-Jan. 15, 2026** print issue.