

# POPE LEO'S FIRST 100 DAYS

*Gerry O'Connell - Pope Francis is a hard act to follow. But Leo XIV is filling the role with remarkable ease. Inside the new pope's first 100 days*

It would not have been easy for anyone to step into the shoes of the fisherman after Pope Francis, just as it was not easy for Benedict XVI to follow St. John Paul II. But Leo XIV has done so with remarkable ease in his first 100 days as pope.

This was facilitated both by his humility and by his fluency in English, Spanish and Italian. By nature, Leo is a rather reserved person, but he also has a spontaneous side that has begun to emerge in his interaction with the crowds, as we saw at the Jubilee of Youth. Although from his first appearance on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, he has tended to stick to prepared texts, he has also begun making off-the-cuff remarks as he becomes more relaxed in his interaction with audiences.

The first native English speaker to become pope since Adrian IV (1154-59), Leo quickly endeared himself to the Italian public, who hardly knew him before his election, through his fluency in the



language of Dante, his humility and the fact that he smiles a lot. His command of English and Spanish, on the other hand, has allowed him to communicate freely in the two languages most spoken in the Catholic world and has facilitated his conversation with religious and political leaders.

In these first three months of his papacy, he has exuded an internal peace and serenity. He seems happy to be pope, just as Francis was. He has adopted a nonstop rhythm of work, giving many private and public audiences and participating in Jubilee Year events. At the same time, he has shown an internal freedom of spirit by doing things his way, including by taking a vacation at the papal summer residence in Castel Gandolfo and not hugging people or posing for selfies, as Francis often did.

While he is different in style from Francis, the American-born pope has already stated clearly—in his address to the cardinals on May 10 and in subsequent speeches—that he is determined to continue moving forward along the paths opened by his predecessor as he sought to further implement the Second Vatican Council (1962-5). He wants to promote unity in the church—his episcopal motto, taken from St. Augustine, is *"In Illo Uno Unum"* ("In the One we are one")—and in that way to contribute to overcoming polarization and division in the world.

Leo XIV said he intends to foster growth in collegiality and synodality and to continue building a synodal, missionary church that proclaims Christ, is open to dialogue, listens to the poor, is inclusive, builds bridges, promotes peace and seeks the advancement of women and the care of creation. He also intends to complete Francis' reform of the Roman Curia and Vatican finances and ensure the safeguarding of minors and vulnerable people. He will be attentive to the plight of migrants; like Francis, he is the descendant of migrants, as he has said on more than one occasion.

The first Augustinian pope's approach is distinct from that of Francis, especially in relation to the Roman Curia, which Leo was a member of for just over two years before his election; the first Jesuit pope never worked at the Vatican.

*"Popes come and go, the Curia remains,"* he told some 5,000 managers and employees of the Roman Curia, the governorate of the Vatican City State and the vicariate of Rome when he met them and their family members in a festive gathering in the Paul VI audience hall on May 24. Earlier, he gained their goodwill by granting them a 500-euro bonus for their extra work during the papal transition. (In 2013, Pope Francis put the customary "conclave bonus" toward charitable works.) And repeating what he said on the night of his election, he told them that *"together, we must look for ways to be a missionary church, a church that builds bridges and encourages dialogue, a church ever open to welcoming...with open arms, all those who are in need of our charity, our presence, our readiness to dialogue and our love."*

Significantly, however, the senior officials and most members of the Secretariat of State were not present at that audience. Leo recognized the different role the secretariat plays by granting them a special audience in the Clementine Hall on June 5. There, in an off-the-cuff remark, he told some 170 officials and members of what is also called the papal secretariat:

*I can say with great sincerity that in these few weeks—a month has not even passed yet since beginning my Petrine ministry—it is evident to me that the pope cannot work alone. There is great necessity to rely on the assistance of many people in the Holy See, and in a special way on all of you in the Secretariat of State.*

His words were welcomed by those who work in this institution that dates back to the 15th century, as was his recognition that *"currently, almost half"* of those working there *"are lay faithful,"* including *"more than 50 women, both lay and religious."* He emphasized the *"catholicity"* of its membership—they come from many different nationalities and cultures—and the *"incarnational"* nature of its work. He concluded by reiterating the appeal made by Paul VI in 1963 to those working in the Secretariat of State: *"Let this place not be clouded by ambition or rivalry; instead, let it be a true community of faith and charity, of 'brothers and sisters, and children of the pope,' who give themselves generously for the good of the church."*

Such closeness to the Secretariat of State would appear to lay the basis for a positive working relationship; at the same time, it raises the question of how independent Leo will be of his advisors when it comes to addressing hot-button ecclesial questions or political and humanitarian issues, such as in Ukraine or Gaza.

As pope, Francis used to make explicit reference to those war-torn countries at almost every Wednesday audience and Sunday Angelus. So far, Leo has not, though he has called for peace in Ukraine and a ceasefire in Gaza on many occasions. A senior Vatican official who asked not to be named told me he considers Leo's reticence *"a good thing"* because it means that when he does

speak, *“the pope’s voice will carry more weight, more impact,”* whereas, he felt, Francis may have weakened his impact by speaking too often on such issues.

A curial cardinal, who also preferred anonymity, remarked, *“Careful that the pope doesn’t become the world’s Walter Cronkite, responsible for telling, twice a week, ‘That’s the way it is.’”*

From the very beginning, Leo adopted a synodal approach, according to Cardinal Pablo Virgilio “Ambo” David, the president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines. He told me by email:

*Pope Leo XIV’s first hundred days reveal a shepherd who builds on Pope Francis’ legacy of a synodal Church, but with his own clear style of listening first, then acting. He has entered the papacy not as one with ready-made answers, but as one eager to engage the whole People of God in discernment. His calm presence and pastoral clarity are already shaping the tone of his leadership.*

*“What stands out is his deliberate, almost counter-cultural choice to slow down and listen before deciding—an approach that mirrors the heart of synodality,”* the cardinal said. Cardinal David attended the ordinary council of the synod at the Vatican on June 26 and recalled that *“when members pressed [Leo] with questions, including on sensitive issues, he lifted his notebook and explained that he had brought it precisely to listen to us, not to answer everything himself. ‘Whatever happened to synodality?’ he asked. ‘I have no intention of acting like a lone ranger.’ That moment spoke volumes about the way he wishes to serve.”*

In these first 100 days, Cardinal David said:

*The surprise has been how quickly he has inspired hope and trust, even in a time of global uncertainty. In just a few months, he has managed to convey both humility and decisiveness, inviting us into shared responsibility for the Church’s mission. It’s a reminder that real leadership in the Church is less about commanding from the top and more about walking together toward Christ.*

*Indeed, that was also the way Leo presented himself to the clergy and faithful of the Diocese of Rome when he was installed as their bishop at St. John Lateran’s Basilica on May 25. He told them he loved them and said, “I offer you ‘the little I have and am.’” Moreover, he said he wished to “listen to everyone as much as possible, in order to learn, understand and decide things together” and to be, in the words of St. Augustine, “a Christian with you and a bishop for you.” At the same time, he has emerged as a strong spiritual leader, promoting peace in a divided world.*

A recent Gallup poll showed that Pope Leo has the most positive image by far among 14 prominent U.S. and global figures. Fifty-seven percent of U.S. adults view the new pope favourably, beating out even Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders.

Asked how he read the first 100 days of this pontificate, the Czech-born Canadian Cardinal Michael Czerny, the prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, told me:

*100 days is a fallacy typical of our times, as if instant results were a reliable, indeed essential, measure and promise of effectiveness. Much sounder, it seems to me, is Pope Leo’s quietly listening and learning, gradually engaging and tirelessly invoking the love of God and promoting the peace of Christ.*

Indeed, over the past three months, Leo has had private audiences with each of the heads of the Vatican dicasteries, as he listened and sought to understand the situation in different offices and to

weigh his options before making any decisions. He also keeps his cards close to his chest. Indicative of this approach is the fact that he has not yet made any major change in personnel; he has not even appointed a successor as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, an office that he knows well, having led it for two years. Surprisingly, Rome's usually busy rumour mill is not grinding out the names of potential candidates for this or other positions, information that is often leaked to Vatican journalists.

Returning to the tradition of his predecessors before Francis that dates back to 1626, the pope has gone to Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence, for a few weeks of vacation in July and August to escape the heat of Rome. There, he can reflect on what personnel decisions to make between September and December, and think about, or perhaps even draft, the outline of his first encyclical, which could address social questions linked to war and peace, poverty, artificial intelligence and migration.

There, overlooking Lake Albano, the pope who experienced the devastating effects of the El Niño weather pattern in the Diocese of Chiclayo, Peru, celebrated Mass for the first time using the new prayers for the care of creation at the Borgo Laudato Si' in Castel Gandolfo. He recalled that Pope Francis had *"donated this small plot of land, these gardens and these walks, in order to continue the important work of caring for creation and our common home."* Leo emphasized the need to persevere in this mission and said, *"We should pray for the conversion of the many people, inside and outside the church, who do not yet recognize the urgent need to care for our common home."*

While at Castel Gandolfo, Leo, who likes to travel, may also cast his mind ahead to foreign trips. No pope in history has travelled as much as he did before being elected to the See of Peter. As prior general of the Augustinians, he visited more than 50 countries, including China and India. Greeting the ambassadors representing the 184 states that have diplomatic relations with the Holy See on May 16, he made clear that as pope, he intends to visit many countries. Preparations are already underway for his visit to Turkey at the end of November to commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in modern-day Iznik and for him to go to Lebanon on that same trip.

It is known that the first Augustinian pope would like to go to Annaba, formerly Hippo, in northeastern Algeria, where St. Augustine was bishop from 385 C.E. to 430 C.E., but sources told America his visit to Algeria could take place in 2026 as part of a longer journey in Africa. He is also expected to return to Latin America in 2026, to visit Peru, Argentina and Uruguay. He has an invitation to visit Vietnam, too, something Francis would have liked to do but had to leave to his successor; that, too, could happen next year.

As a priest and as bishop, Leo was a missionary, and now as pope, he continues being a missionary. He told Vatican employees on May 24:

*The experience of mission forms part of my life, and not only as a baptized person, as for all us Christians, but because as an Augustinian religious I was a missionary in Peru, and in the midst of the Peruvian people my pastoral vocation matured. I will never be able to thank the Lord enough for this gift! Then, the call to serve the Church here in the Roman Curia was a new mission, which I shared with you during these last two years. And still I continue it and will continue it, as long as God wills, in this service that has been entrusted to me.*

This article first appeared last week in the Jesuit magazine, *America*