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The first 100 days of Leo XIV

Leo XIV – a surprise, but not a stopgap solution – A commentary by Thomas Paul Schirmmacher

A press release by Christian Daily International (<https://christiandaily.com/news/the-first-100-days-of-leo-xiv-in-evangelical-perspective>)

(Bonn, 20.08.2025) The Roman Catholic Church has surprised everyone. A super-fast conclave elected a well-educated, rather young pope from the US who, under normal circumstances, could lead the Catholic Church for two decades. Even though he had more power than was generally assumed since 2023 (as head of the dicastery that prepares bishop appointments), he was not one of the big power brokers in the Curia. Most people, even insiders, had not heard of him.

Not a stop-gap pope

Pope Leo is not a stop-gap solution, not a compromise candidate after others failed to achieve a two-thirds majority after several rounds of voting. Pope Francis had told me shortly before his death that he had said his piece and that a completely different character must now follow to build on what Francis had achieved.

I could already see from many details of the inauguration that Leo stands somewhere between Benedict and Francis. He does not separate from his



Pope Leo XIV and Archbishop Thomas Paul Schirmmacher © IIRF/Martin Warnecke

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bodyguards like Francis and does not overturn long-established procedures at short notice, but on the other hand, he moves much more freely and without protection than Benedict ever did.

Leo has his texts checked by his large team, whereas Francis liked to compose his own socio-political statements and was not enthusiastic about having them edited. However, Leo does not display the excessive thoroughness that Benedict expected in all official texts.

Like Francis, Leo is perceived as politically left-leaning, which he emphasized with his choice of name, in contrast to Benedict who stood firmly alongside President George Bush and visited him privately on his birthday. In January 2025, shortly before Trump's inauguration, Francis appointed a well-known critic of Trump, Cardinal Robert W. McElroy, as Archbishop of Washington.

A surprising pope

Overall, however, no pope has been the same as Leo was before becoming pope, whether as bishop or cardinal. In addition, very little is known about Leo XIV's life before his election, probably less than any pope in the last hundred years.

It wouldn't have taken much for a long-time friend of mine and a colleague in the fight against Christian persecution, the Italian Cardinal Pietro Parolin (age 70), to become pope. He was Francis' long-time prime minister (Cardinal Secretary of State), working quietly and very successfully behind the scenes.

He was the head of the papal election, the favorite of Vatican observers, and of a famous British betting agency. According to some reports—disclosure of such information officially is prohibited—Cardinal Parolin received 59 votes on the first ballot, with Cardinal Prevost receiving 49.

Not much changed until Parolin withdrew and Prevost received “well over 100” votes on the fourth ballot, exceeding the required 89. This has happened before, such as when Benedict and Francis received the most votes on the first ballot and Benedict was elected after Francis withdrew.

Will Cardinal Parolin remain in office? The pope has confirmed all offices until September and has made very few new appointments so far. Everyone is eager to see whether he will essentially continue with the Francis team or dare to make some personnel changes.

But Parolin and the current Pope Leo have worked closely and well together for two years, and there is little to separate them in terms of content. Whether the new pope will continue this or consider it too challenging to keep his supposed conclave opponent as his right-hand man, we will probably know by the end of September. In any case, it would be a pity for Catholic-Evangelical cooperation on political issues behind the scenes if Parolin were to retire.

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A few decades ago, Parolin would certainly have won the election as an Italian. But Francis has shifted the conclave from Italy and Europe to what is economically known as the Global South, where 57.8 % of the cardinals eligible to vote come from, plus one has to add the very conservative cardinals from the US. Overall, 109 cardinals, or 80.7 % of the total, were appointed by Pope Francis.

Both leading candidates in the conclave were advanced by Francis. The former pope appointed Prevost as bishop of Peru in 2014, when he was at a kind of dead-end, similar to what happened to Francis himself before he became Pope. Francis promoted Prevost's rise further until, in 2023, he made Prevost head of the dicastery—the department that appoints and transfers bishops and, de facto, also prepares cardinal appointments. This put Cardinal Prevost in a key position in the Vatican, where he retained the highest trust of Francis.

A novelty pope

Pope Leo is in many ways a novelty among popes. He is as fit as a fiddle, as I was able to observe recently at close quarters for hours on end. Not only has he promoted sport throughout his life in many places, he has also practiced it himself. The Vatican gym is losing its most prominent client, as the Pope no longer can go there, and the Vatican has its first boss who exercises regularly and takes care of his health.

Benedict spoke many languages and was highly intelligent and educated, but Leo is even more versatile. He is fluent in five languages and can also read German and Latin. He first studied mathematics and philosophy (1973–1977), then theology (1978–1982) and then canon law (doctorate in 1987). No pope in history has had such a broad education. Considering that Francis, unlike Benedict, did not consider academic theology very important and was at odds with canon law, it is astonishing that he is followed by someone who holds both in high regard.

Leo also has broader leadership experience than any pope before him, having served in dioceses in Peru, as provincial of the Augustinian Order in Peru, as general prior of this order's branch in Rome with worldwide travel, as apostolic administrator, in the Curia, and finally as head of the dicastery. His love of good organization has been evident in every corner of the Vatican in his first 100 days.

Leaving questions of truth aside and simply asking whether the new pope can hold together the world's largest religious community and organization, which some would argue is drifting apart, one has to conclude that if anyone can do it, it's Leo. His biography brings together all the contrasting aspects of the church.

He is familiar with both the local and global situations; he knows parish work and the episcopate as well as religious life and thus the worldwide networks of the Catholic Church. He knows the Global South and the Western world through his experience in Peru and the US, and he has studied mathematics and theology/canon law in both a completely irreligious and completely religious way.

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All this is already evident, even if the question of how he will approach the major challenges facing the church remains open. However, it is already clear that he will continue along the synodal path of Francis, while taking it for granted that synods cannot and must not question fundamental teachings and moral positions of the faith.



During the general audience, the Pope blesses one wedding couple after another © IIRF/Martin Warnecke

Pope Leo is much less charismatic than Francis or John Paul II and more like

Benedict, who was, however, much older. But anyone who concludes from this that he is more of a manager is proven wrong every day, because Leo often takes more time for one-on-one conversations than Francis.

For example, every Catholic couple from around the world has the right to be blessed by the Pope at a general audience for one month after their wedding. Pope Francis usually blessed all these couples together. As I was able to observe and hear at close quarters (for two hours), Pope Leo calls each couple forward individually, asks them who they are and what their prayer intentions are, and then blesses them. With around 50 couples in the queue, this took a long time!

An ecumenical pope?

The current state of ecumenism and the relationship between the Catholic Church and Evangelicals is the only topic I have personally discussed with the Pope. The late Pope Benedict XVI, a German professor, avid reader, and polyglot, was familiar with all the important Protestant works in German, including those of Martin Luther. He paid tribute to Luther on several occasions, especially during his trip to Wittenberg. However, Benedict knew almost nothing about Evangelicals. In his biography of Jesus, he quotes traditional Protestants but no Evangelicals.

Francis brought his personal experience of working with Evangelicals and Pentecostals in Buenos Aires to the table. But he was unfamiliar with Protestant literature and less interested in theological dialogue than in visible signs and what he called the “ecumenism of martyrs,” which formed the basis of my friendship with him.

Nothing is known about the new pope's views on ecumenism. He may well surprise us here, but as things stand today, he lacks ecumenical experience in the USA, as he does in Peru, and as Prior General of the Augustinian Order. In his first 100 days, he has not

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made ecumenism a major issue, and his visitors have not included other major leaders of the Protestant world.

Leo is unlikely to style himself after Leo X (1513–1521), who excommunicated Martin Luther in 1521, but my first impression is that building bridges in the political arena and peacemaking in contexts of international and civil war will take priority over ecumenism or even interfaith dialogue. My sense is that, if anything, his focus will be on strengthening relations with the Orthodox and other ancient churches, rather than with the traditional Protestant or otherwise Evangelical churches.

Since the World Evangelical Alliance and the Lausanne Movement recently seem to be moving away from ecumenical dialogue as well, I fear that great collaborative ecumenical achievements, such as the document titled “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World” (2011), will remain artifacts of past relationships.

A pope for a new era

At the same time, Rome has become very attractive to young people. I have seen this many times in Rome, where there are many evangelical young people among the streams of pilgrims for whom the Evangelicals have nothing comparable to offer. I also experienced this when we organized a Catholic-Evangelical concert in a packed stadium on World Youth Day in Lisbon. We are currently planning another large Evangelical concert in Rome.

The Catholic Church is also outpacing Evangelicals in the digital faith context, with a host of young Roman Catholic influencers in all countries. I feel strongly that Evangelical influencers should discuss and collaborate much more with Catholics in these cyber realms, perhaps establishing a new kind of ecumenism.



Pope Leo as he lives and breathes, with the third-generation papal photographer to his right © IIRF/Martin Warnecke

The biggest challenge will be that evangelism is gaining momentum among Catholics as we approach the 2,000th anniversary of the resurrection, to be celebrated by most Christians in 2033. While many Pentecostals and Charismatics are very open to joint activities with the Catholics here—a huge shift over the last ten years—representation

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from the World Evangelical Alliance and, especially, the Lausanne Movement is found wanting, it appears that they are withdrawing.

At the last Catholic world meeting on “Global 2033” in Fiuggi, Italy, in June this year (2025), Rick Warren and I were the only non-charismatic Evangelical leaders present. As a member of the 2033 advisory board of “CHARIS,” I am experiencing firsthand the evangelistic awakening in the charismatic wing of the Catholic Church, which is closely aligned with Protestant charismatics but has virtually no contact with the large evangelical networks.

Last (but not least)

I recently discussed the Pope with some high-ranking religious Jews. Their concerns about him were not primarily based on his stance toward Israel, but rather on the fact that they consider him to be insufficiently religious. Indeed, although his major speeches contain many theological elements, frequently referring to the sacraments and experiences, they are primarily focused on issues that affect all human beings rather than the specifics of the faith.

Developing this further, as a general rule, the name “Leo” tends to be associated with Thomism and social welfare, reflecting the legacy of Leo XIII, especially his encyclicals *Aeternis patris* (1879), which laid the foundations for the revival of Thomistic philosophy, and *Rerum novarum* (1891), a social teaching that placed human dignity at the center, anticipating the central position of human dignity in today’s human rights framework.

This is an important foundation, but it easily leads to a focus on commonalities rather than on what specifically constitutes the Christian faith, without which many lofty values could remain suspended in a vacuum and become unfulfilled wishes since it is by intentionally believing in and following Jesus that those values are brought to life by the Holy Spirit in the most powerful and tangible ways—as we Evangelicals will continue to promote.

Now, let us see what the coming days of Pope Leo XIV’s leadership will reveal, however many hundreds of them there may be.

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- **Photo 1:** Pope Leo XIV and Archbishop Thomas Paul Schirrmacher © IIRF/ Martin Warnecke
- **Photo 2:** During the general audience, the Pope blesses one wedding couple after another © IIRF/Martin Warnecke
- **Photo 3:** Pope Leo as he lives and breathes, with the third-generation papal photographer to his right © IIRF/Martin Warnecke

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