

GETTING TO KNOW POPE LEO XIV

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Paul Kengor, *American Pontiff: Pope Leo XIV and His Plan to Heal the Church* (Humanix Books)

Most people, including Catholics, know little about Robert Francis Prevost of Chicago, the Augustinian who became Pope Leo XIV. Thanks to Paul Kengor, Grove City College professor, author and editor-in-chief of *The American Spectator*, we now know a great deal about him. He has written the most compelling biography of our new pope in print.

Inheriting a Mess

Leo inherited a mess. It was intentional. It didn't take long before his predecessor, Pope Francis, implored the young people in Rio de Janeiro to "make a mess of things." He said to the crowd, "What is it that I expect as a consequence of World Youth Day? I want a mess." He explicitly demanded, "I want trouble in the dioceses!"

This was not a throwaway line. Francis meant what he said. On Christmas Eve, 2019, in his midnight Mass homily, he stated that God loves even those who make "a complete mess of things." In 2024, he told another audience to "make a mess." No one doubts that he succeeded. Australian Cardinal George Pell spoke for many when he labeled Francis' pontificate as "a disaster," "a catastrophe" and a "toxic nightmare."

Some experienced the mess more than others. Those who prefer the "old Mass," or the Traditional Latin Mass (TLM), were undercut when Francis issued his apostolic letter *Traditionis custodes*. "When Pope Francis had said with a grin that he wanted to 'make a mess of things' with his pontificate," Kengor writes, "*Traditionis custodes* was a perfect case in point." The restrictions that this document imposed was seen

by traditionalists as a statement of rebuke, if not hostility.

The traditionalists were not overreacting. Francis called them “rigid” Catholics, “full of rottenness, therefore of greed, or wickedness.” Kengor notes how bizarre this name-calling was. “The typical TLM types gave birth to large families that were so serious about their faith that they were producing religious vocations: priests and nuns.” So if the goal is to marginalize them, where are we going to find new recruits? “Did the pope hate them?”, Kengor asks. “Did he see them really as Pharisees? Why was he restricting them?”

It was left to the next pope to start the cleanup.

Electing a New Pope

Some observers thought that after Francis died, the new pope would be Francis II. They reasoned that since Francis had expanded the number of cardinal electors to 135, adding 15 new electors to the previous maximum of 120, that the next pope would be much like himself. Others disagreed, emphasizing that many cardinals felt Francis had moved too far from the center, alienating millions of Catholics. As events unfolded, the latter perspective proved triumphant.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin was the odds-on favorite. Other serious contenders included Cardinal Tagle of the Philippines, Cardinal Pizzaballa and Cardinal Zuppi (both from Italy), Cardinal Turkson of Ghana and Cardinal Erdő of Hungary. Cardinal Raymond Burke of the United States was a serious candidate as well.

There was another American, Robert Prevost of Chicago, who caught the eye of some observers. Edward Pentin, rightly regarded as the most competent of all Catholic journalists, listed him in his top ten, albeit near the bottom. Pentin noted that Prevost was seen as a possible compromise candidate, someone whose lengthy missionary service in Peru allowed him “to be seen more as an international candidate

than an American.”

Kengor nicely captures the drama that led to a three-way race: Parolin, Erdő and Prevost. “In other words,” Kengor says, “Prevost had never been an underdog.” What helped him enormously was the role played by New York Archbishop Cardinal Timothy Dolan. Dolan convinced his colleagues that Prevost was really a “citizen of the world,” not merely an American.

Pope Leo XIV sent unmistakable signs of unity right from the start. When he greeted the crowd at St. Peter’s Square, his demeanor was calm, and he was wearing traditional papal attire. For Kengor, this was convincing, it meant the “new Holy Father showed signs of stability, order, of quelling the chaos.” This was in stark contrast to what Francis yielded.

Prevost the Man

Prevost hailed from Chicago, attended a minor seminary in his high school years, St. Augustine Seminary, and chose an Augustinian-founded institution for his college experience, Villanova University. He received his doctorate at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome, writing his dissertation on an aspect of the Order of Saint Augustine. In 1977 he joined the Order of Saint Augustine as a novice.

No matter where he was, Prevost struck his associates as someone who was smart, humble and holy. He was also a good listener, someone who sought to learn from those whom he interacted with. A priest, who was one of his seminary schoolmates, said he “listened intently.” He was “never flippant” in response, and “never ‘off the cuff.’”

At Villanova, his decision to major in math was something that greatly impressed Kengor. “The fact that Pope Leo XIV is a mathematician says something about his mind—his very orderly mind.” It paid good dividends when he became pope. “Prevost inherited a Francis papacy that confused the faithful with its disorder. Math, on the other hand, seeks to bring order out of

chaos. Mathematicians are problem solvers.” This will serve him well, for as Kengor observes, Leo is poised to “tidy up the Francis ‘mess of things’ that frustrated all.”

Prevost chose the name Leo XIV largely because he was so impressed by Pope Leo XIII’s historic encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The 1891 encyclical was a social-justice statement that pointedly rejected socialism. Leo XIII knew how socialism undermined marriage and the family, the key cells in society. He was well aware of what Marx and Engels had wrought, and wanted nothing to do with the communist schemes. “As Leo XIII put it,” says Kengor, “these socialists, communists, and nihilists ‘leave nothing untouched,’” debasing marriage and the family.

Kengor is a student of communism, having written extensively about it. That is why his analysis of *Rerum Novarum* is so important. He debunks the myth that because it focuses on social justice that somehow that means it embraces socialism. Indeed, Leo XIII condemned socialism many times in his famous encyclical. His staunch defense of private property— an anathema to socialists—removes all doubt about his alleged affinity for socialism. Moreover, socialism’s interest in elevating the state over the primacy of the family was another reason to reject it wholeheartedly.

Pope Leo XIV saw firsthand how Marxism works. His tenure in Peru in the 1980s was a time when liberation theology was in vogue. It is a pernicious blend of Marxism and the social justice teachings of the Catholic Church, with a decided edge given to the former. He also witnessed the rise of communist-inspired guerrilla groups. Kengor writes that “Latin America had become a cauldron of toxic liberation theology and violent Marxism exported and sponsored throughout the region by Fidel Castro’s Cuba and the Soviet Union.” In fact, Prevost was almost victimized by these thugs. This surely had a profound effect on him.

Steadying the Ship

There are some Catholic commentators who sharply dislike discussions about “liberal Catholics” and “conservative Catholics.” Be that as it may, it cannot be denied that there is a “progressive” wing and a “traditionalist” wing in the Catholic Church; the former reject many Church teachings, especially those governing marriage, the family and sexuality; the latter uphold them. Both sides closely examined every move the new pope made, hoping to see which side he was favoring.

Given his Augustinian roots, it was no surprise that one of Leo’s first comments reflected Augustine’s natural law teachings. He made no bones about his defense of marriage as the exclusive reserve of a man and a woman. Following Pope Benedict XVI, he made plain his concerns over the threat that moral relativism embodies.

Kengor wryly notes, “The world was learning—to the regret of many—that the Catholic pope was, well, Catholic. He proclaimed Catholic truths and teachings on matters like marriage, abortion, and the scourge of relativism.”

One of the first tests for Leo was what to do about the problems that Francis had created at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Marriage and the Family. This institute, founded by John Paul II, was staffed by some prominent traditionalists, and enjoyed a stellar reputation. But the first chance Francis had to make changes, he moved quickly to radically transform it into a place that few admirers would recognize.

The turmoil that ensued, putting Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia in charge, made headlines in the Catholic press, and beyond. Paglia and his new team introduced a “new pastoral theology” that was anchored more in the social sciences than in moral theology. Well respected conservative scholars went public with their criticism; they were especially concerned about the

change in personnel at the institute. Some spoke about a “betrayal” of the institute’s founding mission.

This was not lost on Leo. He moved with dispatch to replace Paglia with a relatively young 54-year old, Cardinal Baldassare Reina, signaling a return to the institute’s theological roots.

Next up was what to do about TLM. This issue was foisted upon Leo from the beginning as two American bishops took aim at Latin Mass Catholics. Bishop Michael Martin of Charlotte, North Carolina led off, followed by Detroit Archbishop Edward Weisenburger.

Martin said he was “purifying and unifying the celebration of the Mass,” though traditionalists did not see it that way. They greeted his restrictions on TLM as an attack on them. Charlotte clergy and laity both expressed their concerns, and there were many. Sunday Latin Masses were drawing a big turnout, so it appeared not only to be mean-spirited to restrict TLM, it was counterproductive. It was this kind of consternation that provoked a response from Leo. Bishop Martin announced that he was putting his new policy on ice.

The situation with Archbishop Weisenburger, who fired respected faculty members at the Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, and banned TLM at the end of June, remains undecided. He is obviously pushing the envelope, beckoning a response from Leo.

Another serious problem facing our new pope is how to deal with *Fiducia supplicans*, the declaration by Pope Francis allowing blessings of same-sex couples. On the same day that edict was given, homosexual activists like Fr. Jim Martin began blessing legally married homosexual men. Another New York priest, Fr. Gerry Murray, pushed back, noting what Francis did was wrong. “We do not bless sin,” which means priests “have no authority to bless homosexual couples.”

At some point, Leo will have to decide whether Fr. Martin or Fr. Murray is right. We know that at a 2012 synod, Prevost spoke strongly against “anti-Christian lifestyle choices,” including the “redefinition of marriage” and “alternative families composed of same-sex partners and their adopted children.” If he were to pick up on that position, it would allay the fears of the faithful.

Kengor ends his magnificent book by quoting an impressive young New York priest, Fr. Brian A. Graebe. It is “time to heal,” and no one is better situated to do that than Pope Leo XIV.