Leo XIV, a bridge-building Pope

Following his election as the 267th successor of Peter on 8 May, when he adopted the name Leo XIV, the American Robert Francis Prevost has called for "building bridges through dialogue, through encounter, uniting us all to be one people always at peace".

In the light of his paths of pastoral and spiritual leadership throughout his 69 years of life – 22 of them as a missionary and pastor in Peru – one can glimpse a pontificate marked by dialogue, mission and unity *ad intra* and *ad extra* of the Church, in continuity with the great social and ecclesial concerns of Francis.

"Leo XIV will give continuity to Francis' project of a missionary Church committed to the peripheries, but he will do so with his own mark", said Brazilian Cardinal Leonardo Steiner, Archbishop of Manaus, underlining that "he will be a great bridge-builder", which is what 'supreme pontiff' means. "There is a train on the move and Leo XIV is getting on to contribute to this journey with a personal nuance", remarked Spanish Cardinal Juan José Omella, Archbishop of Barcelona.

His close proximity and communion with the programmatic options of Jorge Mario Bergoglio – with whom he used to meet weekly – is shown in his speech to the College of Cardinals on the morning of 10 May, when he expressed his desire to uphold the commitments of his predecessor as set out in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*: "the return to the primacy of Christ in proclamation; the missionary conversion of the entire Christian community; growth in collegiality and synodality; attention to the *sensus fidei*, especially in its most proper and inclusive forms, such as popular piety; loving care for the weak and discarded; courageous and trusting dialogue with the contemporary world in its different components and realities".

Social dialogue for peace

In this sense, the Argentinian theologian Emilce Cuda, secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, which Prevost has presided over for the last two years, said that if "Francis repositioned the Church on the peripheries, Leo XIV will reposition it at the centre of world power to make social dialogue a reality as the only guarantee of true peace".

This desire was expressed by the pontiff himself in his first greeting on the day of his election, indicating his desire to walk “as a united Church, always seeking peace and justice, always seeking to work as men and women faithful to Jesus Christ, without fear, to proclaim the Gospel, to be missionaries”.

Also, in his 12 May address to media representatives, he called for “communication for peace”, because “disarmed and disarming communication allows us to share a different view of the world and to act in a manner that is consistent with our human dignity”.

A global perspective

The experience he acquired during more than a decade as Prior General of the Order of St. Augustine and member of the Union of Superiors General (USG), in dealing with global issues without losing sensitivity to local realities, endows him with a particular wisdom and acuity to face the dramas that burden believers, as well as contemporary societies, marked by wars, injustices and inequalities.

The Secretary General of the Latin-American Bishops’ Council (CELAM), Mgr. Lizardo Estrada, an Augustinian and auxiliary bishop of Cusco (Peru), who has known him for almost three decades and was a disciple of Prevost in the seminary, noted, “he is a simple person, close, kind and prudent, who has the gift of listening; he is tranquil, calm, and transmits peace, although he also knows how to call attention when necessary and expresses it with clarity and charity”.

His years as a missionary and pastor in Peru not only earned him his Peruvian nationality in 2015, but, according to Mgr. Lizardo, “Pope Leo XIV knows our scourges and needs: migration, corruption, trafficking, the reality of the rainforest and, in general, he knows the problems of Latin America, where he has shown how politicians have forgotten the peripheries, the Amazon, the Andean region, the indigenous peoples, peasants and Afro-descendants, among others”.

The journalist Bruno Desidera of the Italian news agency SIR has a similar thought, recognising that “the new Pope is also ‘a shepherd with the smell of sheep’, and his sheep were the faithful and simple people of Chiclayo in Peru”. In all certainty, Mr. Desidera continues, “he will prioritise communion and unity in the Church, he will be a reformer without excesses, ready to address many open questions during Francis’ pontificate”.

In fact, among the reasons that led him to take the name Leo XIV, Prevost

detailed that it is “mainly because Pope Leo XIII in his historic Encyclical Rerum Novarum addressed the social question in the context of the first great industrial revolution. In our own day, the Church offers to everyone the treasury of her social teaching in response to another industrial revolution and to developments in the field of artificial intelligence that pose new challenges for the defence of human dignity, justice and labour”. It is clear that the new Pope is interested in the emerging peripheries.

Unity as a priority

On the other hand, the new Bishop of Rome pointed out that “the Pope, from St Peter to me, his unworthy successor, is a humble servant of God and of the brethren, and nothing more than this”. And his desire to listen to the advice, suggestions and concrete proposals of the cardinals, whom he considers “his close collaborators”, is very striking.

Building unity is part of the charism of the Augustinians – and it will do us well to read St. Augustine to understand the spirituality and vision of Leo XIV – “the unity of the Church does not mean uniformity, but a firm and profound communion in diversity, provided it is maintained in full fidelity to the Gospel”, said Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re at the Eucharist *Pro eligendo Romano Pontifice* with which the conclave began.

For Prevost, “polarisation is a real challenge2, as he himself stated in an interview he gave to Vatican News at the end of October 2024, expressing his desire to “invite everyone to the table, to a table of dialogue”, because “we can give that witness of promoting peace, dialogue, in the midst of a world in conflict and polarisation” that needs to be open to the possibility of listening to the other.

His North American origin, his missionary experience in Latin America and his global background direct him as a Pope who will wisely influence social dialogue, peace, unity and the building of bridges to overcome the gaps or, perhaps, the walls of indifference and exclusion, fully assuming the pastoral mission of the Church in today’s world.

Their episcopal motto, *“In Illo uno unum”*, is inspired by the words of St. Augustine: “although we Christians are many, in the one Christ we are one”.

Photo: Vatican News