A man among others

In a collection of his writings, Pope Leo XIV presents religious life as a radical commitment to undoing injustice

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Freedom Under Grace: Reflections on the Spiritual Tradition that Formed Me
POPE LEO XIV
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MY FIRST THOUGHT, on finishing Pope Leo's new book, a collection of the addresses and homilies he gave as prior general of the Augustinian Order, was that it must have been nice for him to become Pope and enjoy a little downtime. In the first few months of his election as prior general, he spoke at events in four continents, sometimes only days apart. I had a lighter travel schedule when I worked for *National Geographic*. He maintained this energetic itinerary throughout the 12 years that he led the Order of St Augustine (OSA), from 2001–2013, the window we are afforded by this collection.

It is ordered chronologically while recognising, I think, that some of his writings have a niche audience – Augustinians, anyone in religious life, and hacks (I am lucky enough to fall into both these latter categories). Leo's publisher suggests you read the book thematically, and provides a second table of contents to help. But this is a bit like using one of those indexes you find at the back of some New Testaments: you miss the depth of the reference if you skip the breadth of the story. I wanted to know the whole story of Robert Prevost.

AN AUGUSTINIAN I spoke to on background told me that Leo – "Bob" – has a great sense of humour: he loves a joke, even if he isn't necessarily telling it. This is very much the man of *Freedom Under Grace*: pastoral, clever, well researched, he gets things done with enormous subtlety. During his first few years in leadership, he reflects that European circumscriptions miss out on the same opportunities for collaboration – and, tacitly, cultural leadership – as provinces in Latin America and Asia-Pacific that have federalised. By 2006 he is in Brno, speaking at the second ever gathering of Augustinians in Europe; by 2011 at the Assembly of the Organisation of Augustinians of Europe. In his first term he exhorts the OSAs not to abandon dreams for new foundations, despite a decline in vocations. In Australia, in 2010, he was particularly warm about a dream of a new community in Vietnam. By 2019, that vision had become a new mission, still flourishing today.

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Pope Leo XIV – Robert Francis Prevost – when Augustinian prior general in 2012

> He is refreshingly anti-institution, willing to call out tepidity, passionate about authentic community life

My Augustinian friend told me that, in the OSA, the prior general is a "man among others", one among equals. This is something Prevost would have appreciated – his doctoral thesis, as a canon lawyer, was on the role of prior in the Augustinian community. The leader I encountered in this book reads the "signs of the times" – inequality, fragmentation, individualism – is attentive to people with solutions, and then clears a path for them. There is greater continuity with Pope Francis than I had appreciated. He is eloquent about economic injustice – "the unjust distribution of material goods continues in the context of a culture that claims to globalise the economy but is evidently incapable of globalising solidarity" (Madrid, 2005). He understands religious life as a radical commitment to the undoing of this injustice. I bet he started some uncomfortable conversations at house meetings. "How prepared are we really to allow our lives to be renewed by the poor?" he asks at the close of the order's 2007 General Chapter. "[...] To be challenged, even showing an openness to living with them and by allowing them to share their lives, their faith, with us?"

JESUS "began and ended with the poor". "We, on the other hand, protected by the traditions of our institutions, are sometimes more likely to find ourselves among those who 'read the Gospel as if they had no money, and who manage their money as if they had never read the Gospel'." This is brave and consistent: a central theme of Prevost's addresses to Augustinians is renewal for evangelical purpose. He is refreshingly anti-institution, willing to call out tepidity and passionate about authentic community life (it is notable that he lives in community as Pope). "A community that is concerned about maintenance will think primarily about how to save their congregation. The community committed to mission will be concerned about how to reach the world." This was a bold thing to say to Religious in 2010; it is even bolder now, when many congregations worldwide are prioritising so-called completion. Apart from his somewhat notorious Statement to the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelisation in 2012, where he (from what I hear, uncharacteristically) lists a "homosexual lifestyle" alongside euthanasia in a tally of beliefs and practices at odds with the Gospel, the book is carefully silent on some significant topics. I could cherry-pick lines about women and "cold and expressionless liturgies of the past", but they would tell you more about me than him. The book, like Leo, is subtle and measured, and that tells you a great deal about the man now in the Vatican. Right at the end, speaking in Castile shortly before being made a bishop, Prevost said: "There have been centuries of obedience in the Church. Unfortunately, it is probably safe to say that we have not had several centuries of leadership [...] Had there been such leadership, there would not have been the ecclesiastical corruption, the scandal of abuse, turning a blind eye to the horrors of slavery and other failures of leadership." Could he have imagined, saying that, that he would be Pope a decade later? It is a consolation to me, as I hope it is to him, to discover through this book that his formation as an Augustinian prepared him to be precisely the person the Church needed: kind, deliberate, unhurried; the kind of moral leader whose solidarity answers to just two constituents – God and the poor.

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Sr Liz Dodd is a sister of St Joseph of Peace