

What to expect from an Augustinian pope

James K. A. Smith, May 12, 2025

When Pope Leo XIV emerged onto the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square, I was moved by what I can only describe as his receptivity. His was a smiling, open-hearted face. He seemed humbled by the scene and grateful to receive the warmth and love of the people.

Then my phone started blowing up. A fellow Villanova Wildcat had just been elected pope!

Excited by an Augustinian bishop of Rome, friends began texting. An email thread of St. Augustine scholars chimed in on the news, musing about the shape of an Augustinian papacy.

And that's the question I've been thinking about ever since: What might we expect from an Augustinian pope? I listened to Pope Leo's first messages with Augustinian ears. In his first words from the balcony, and then in his homily at his first Mass, I heard abiding themes from the Doctor of Grace.

Already in his first "Urbi et Orbi" address, for example, one could hear Pope Leo's vision for faith on the move. "So let us move forward, without fear," he encouraged the flock, "together, hand in hand with God and with one another." When Pope Leo described himself as "a son of Saint Augustine," he pictured faith as a pilgrimage: "So may we all walk together towards that homeland that God has prepared for us." Faith as "walking," discipleship as a journey, the Christian life as a long pilgrimage—these are deeply Augustinian metaphors.

For St. Augustine, baptism is not an arrival, and conversion is not the end of the road; both are just the beginning of a journey with and into God's very life. Elsewhere I have described this as Augustine's "refugee spirituality." Every human heart, Augustine suggests, is both running from something and running toward something. We experience alienation and unsettledness in this world, but we also have a home-hunger that compels us to look, as Pope Leo put it, for a "homeland" that we've never been to before. Christ is "the Way," and to be in Christ is to be on the way. This is also why, like Pope Francis, Leo is deeply concerned with the plight of migrants and refugees, decrying "the neglect of mercy" and "appalling violations of human dignity" in his first homily.

Echoing his father, Augustine, Pope Leo emphasizes that we never undertake this journey alone. The church is a ragtag community journeying together, like Chaucer's rowdy pilgrims. So we walk together, he emphasizes over and over, "hand in hand with God and one another."

St. Augustine is such a towering intellect in the history of the church that we might miss how important friendship was for him. His *Confessions* is animated by crucial friendships, some of which endured his entire life. Augustine could not imagine faith apart from community. "I couldn't be happy without friends," he writes. Later in his life, when he was cajoled into becoming a bishop, he had one stipulation: that he be permitted to found a monastic community within the bishop's residence so he wouldn't have to live there alone.

The fruit of Augustine's thinking about communal living is expressed in *The Rule of St. Augustine*, the oldest monastic rule in the Western church, later influencing St. Benedict. Augustine's Rule includes a piece of wisdom that I hear echoed in the vision of Pope Leo XIV: "Whenever you go out, walk together, and when you reach your destination, stay together."

And where are we going? In his first words as pope, Leo spoke of a "homeland that God has prepared for us." This is the language of Augustine's *City of God*. Like the prodigal son, we are on a journey home to

a father who welcomes us with unconditional love. But unlike that prodigal son, our journey home is not a simple return. In some sense, we were made for a country we've never visited. Our citizenship is in the city of God for which we long and for which we labor.

St. Augustine distinguished between the "earthly city" and the "city of God," not as two planes of existence—a distinction between heaven and earth—but rather as two different ways of being a *civitas*, a "people" or a "republic." What distinguishes the earthly city from the city of God is not mundane, material earth vs. ethereal, eternal heaven, but rather, Augustine emphasizes, two different ways of loving. The earthly city is a way of being human animated by the *libido dominandi*—a lust for power and domination. The "republic" that is the city of God is characterized by a love of God and neighbor that expresses itself in a willingness to sacrifice for others.

Much has been made of Pope Leo XIV as the first American pope. I suspect that for him, as an Augustinian, this identifier means almost nothing. Whatever its gifts and transgressions, the republic that is the United States of America is, from an Augustinian perspective, yet one more outpost of the earthly city. I also suspect that he sees a foretaste of the city of God not in the power-mongering and domination of the U.S. government, but in the quiet, sacrificial community of his longtime diocese in Peru.

The Cuban-American theologian Justo González wrote an evocative book called *The Mestizo Augustine* to describe the way St. Augustine lived a kind of "hybrid" life from the time of his birth as the child of a Roman father and a Berber, North African mother. Augustine's theology reflected a similar mestizo sensibility: To live "on the way" with Jesus was to also live between two worlds. Pope Leo's own Creole heritage reflects this sort of legacy, but I expect it has been his pastoral and missionary work in South America that has reinforced this Augustinian sense of a citizenship that transcends national borders. (But I'm sure he still roots for the White Sox. You can take the boy out of south Chicago but...you know.)

A final Augustinian theme I hear in Pope Leo's first words: a passionate missionary concern to meet the world where it is, coupled with a deep conviction that the Gospel promises what the world craves—peace. I confess that I teared up at the pope's very first words: "Peace be with you all." As he noted, these were the first words spoken by the risen Christ to his puzzled and despairing disciples. The peace Jesus promises is not just the absence of conflict or the cessation of hostilities; peace, rather, is the end of anxiety. It is Jesus' promise to be, finally, what we have been frantically chasing in a million inchoate ways: satisfaction of a hunger we cannot explain.

Everybody's got a hungry heart, as the Augustinian bard of New Jersey put it, and when Jesus offers us peace what he really offers is rest. Come to me, you who are weary and carrying a heavy burden, Jesus says, and you no longer have to keep proving yourself. You can rest, because Jesus' love is not predicated on your performance. Your restless heart can find a home here.

I heard this Augustinian passion in Pope Leo's first homily when he spoke to "the world in which we live, with its limitations and its potential, its questions and its convictions." Pope Leo's missionary impulse is informed by an Augustinian diagnosis of the modern condition. This attunes him to the world's hungers and hopes, but it also gives him insight into the world's misguided attempts to satisfy this hunger with paltry substitutes.

For St. Augustine, our idolatries are not so much false beliefs as misdirected loves. We keep looking for love in all the wrong places, as Johnny Lee twanged in the soundtrack to "Urban Cowboy." This is why, in his first homily, Pope Leo noted our tendency to seek security in things like "technology, money,

success, power or pleasure.” And Christians are not immune to these temptations, he cautions, which is why we end up living in what he calls “a state of practical atheism.”

But it’s not just the diagnosis that is Augustinian; it is also the prescription. Get more rest, the ancient doctor tells us, by which he means: Find yourself in the One you were made for. As Augustine famously phrased it at the opening of his *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” I think this animates Pope Leo’s vision for evangelism. The Gospel is not just the answer to a question; Christ is food for hungry hearts. We must be attuned to the restless desires of the world, even sympathetic to all of the misguided ways we try to satisfy this hunger, if we are going to offer Christ as the bread of life.

In the 1879 encyclical “*Aeterni Patris*,” Pope Leo XIII extolled and enshrined St. Thomas Aquinas as a privileged doctor of the church, launching a revival of scholasticism into the 20th century. I’m not sure our world needs us to parse arcane metaphysics at this moment. I think the world needs to hear that God is near to the broken-hearted and offers his own body to satisfy our longings.

Perhaps what Leo XIII did for Aquinas, Pope Leo XIV can do for St. Augustine, that proto-existentialist whose insights into the hungers of the human heart are especially germane to our secular age—which, despite everything, can’t seem to shake the sense that we are made for something more.