



THE ARCHBISHOP OF BRISBANE

ON THE ELECTION OF POPE LEO XIV

From some time back, I thought Cardinal Robert Prevost was a rough chance to be elected Pope. But I was surprised when I woke early to the news of his election as Pope Leo XIV. I was also delighted.

He is US-born but is a genuine citizen of the world and the kind of polyglot that presumes. His father was of Italian-French background and his mother had Spanish heritage, which is why he looks Latin. He's spent much of his ministerial life in Peru, and for some years was the Prior General of the Order of Saint Augustine. This took him to every part of the world, including Australia which he visited several times.

It was Pope Francis who tapped him, surprisingly, for the crucial role of Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops which oversees the appointment and management of bishops around the world. This too gave him a birdseye view of the global Church and a sense of how the Roman Curia works. It also gave him a profile among the Cardinal electors.

In the role, he quickly acquired a reputation as approachable, modest, pastoral, non-ideological, reasonable and firm - qualities he had shown as Prior General of the Augustinians.

My own brief dealings with him left me impressed. He struck me as a man who could listen and who was hard to fluster, a good driver in heavy traffic. His rise to bishop, cardinal and pope has been rapid; so too was his election. But he isn't a man to rush things; he has an air of calm about him. That will serve him well as Pope.

He will continue basic trajectories of the Francis pontificate, but he will be his own man. In some ways he's a Francis creation, but he isn't a Francis clone.

The choice of Leo as his papal name is intriguing. I presume it looks back to Pope Leo XIII at the end of the nineteenth century who led the Catholic Church's engagement with the modern world. It may also look back to Pope Leo I known as the Great. He was Pope in the chaotic fifth century as the Western Empire decayed and new barbarisms threatened.

In our own chaotic time as new barbarisms appear, the Church cannot retreat into a self-protective world. Pope Leo XIV looks to be the Spirit's surprising choice to lead a new engagement and to bring fresh hope not just to the Church but to the world. Echoing the Psalmist, we pray: "May the Lord preserve him and give him life and make him blessed upon the earth".

✠ Mark Coleridge
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