



People kneel in prayer at Madonna della Strada Chapel at Loyola University Chicago shortly before Chicago-born Robert Francis Cardinal Prevost was announced as Pope Leo XIV, Thursday, May 8, 2025, in Chicago. (AP/Erin Hooley)

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After white smoke billowed Thursday from the Sistine Chapel, signaling that a pope had been chosen, students in every classroom at The Frances Xavier Warde School in Chicago had their eyes glued to TV screens.

As the image of the new pope, [Chicago native Cardinal Robert Prevost](#), appeared onscreen, cheers erupted through the hallways. Children jumped out of their seats, pumping their hands in the air.

"Our students are just beside themselves," said Mary Perrotti, director of advancement at the school. "They're beyond excited and can't believe a Chicagoan is their new pope. They were in awe."

Prevost, 69, [took the name Leo XIV](#) and replaced Pope Francis, who died last month. The first American elected pontiff, Pope Leo XIV was born and raised in Chicago [before undertaking his ministry in Peru](#). Catholic Chicagoans gathered in churches and celebrated from their homes as the historic decision was announced.

"Our young people have a model now of a leader with [justice and compassion at the heart of his ministries](#) — and who is from their home," Perrotti said. "It's such a deep feeling of connection for them."

Prevost was born in 1955 in the south side Chicago neighborhood of Bronzeville and grew up in suburban Dolton, near St. Mary of the Assumption, where he attended Mass and elementary school.

He later studied theology at the Catholic Theological Union of Chicago in Hyde Park and taught in local Catholic schools, including at St. Rita High School, [according to the school](#).

"We are overjoyed that someone who is beloved and known to us is now the beloved leader of the whole entire church," said Barbara Reid, a Dominican sister and president of the Catholic Theological Union.

Classmates reflect on new pope's hometown connection

John Doughney, a fellow St. Mary's grade school graduate from 1969, remembers Prevost as a "friend to everyone" and a "kind, caring, compassionate young man."

"Even when he was 12 and 13, it was apparent to all of us that he knew what his calling was," he said. "It would've shocked all of us if he didn't go into the priesthood. We're so proud of him."

Linda Eickmann, 62, was also born and raised in Dolton and attended St. Mary's. When she saw the news of the new pope on TV, she screamed with joy.

"How cool is that?" she said. "A pope from my elementary school, from my town. It's unreal."

Eickmann remembered Prevost's family as being so deeply involved in the St. Mary's community that everyone knew their names. They ran sloppy joe sales to raise money for the school, and all their sons were altar boys, including Prevost.

Raul Raymundo, co-founder of a local community advocacy group called the Resurrection Project, said Thursday was a proud day for Chicagoans and he hoped Pope Leo XIV will "continue Pope Francis' legacy and Chicago's legacy of [social justice and compassion](#), especially in welcoming immigrants."

"There's tears of joy, of hope, of motivation to rise to this moment and leave this world better than we found it," said Raymundo, an immigrant from Mexico who grew up in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood.

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Chicagoans gather in churches, share memes to celebrate Pope Leo XIV

At Holy Name Cathedral, about two dozen people gathered to pray as light filtered in through the stained glass windows.

Kneeling in a pew, Laurel Legler said she isn't Catholic or even Christian but felt she had to be there after the new American pope's election was announced. She called it a "profound moment."

Zoë Poehlman, a nurse who moved from Kansas City to Chicago a few months ago, described the mood as exciting and hopes there will be citywide celebrations. "It was just so crazy," she said.

Fr. Gregory Sakowicz, the cathedral's rector, said that when the new pope was announced, the sun came out — a coincidence he described as "God's way of remaining anonymous." He said he was "happily shocked," and that he had a burning question: Whether the new Pope was a White Sox fan?

When a journalist in the crowd said she'd heard Pope Leo XIV is a Cubs fan, Sakowicz chuckled. "God bless him," he said. It turns out he's a Sox fan.

On social media, people swapped memes about Chicago staples — deep-dish and tavern-style pizza, the Chicago liqueur Malört and baseball, reflecting the civic pride of Chicago residents as they claimed the pope as one of their own.

Google search traffic for "Da Pope" skyrocketed, and a local T-shirt company announced it would sell "Da Pope" shirts with a blue-and-orange Bears-themed design. Chicagoans overlayed Chicago Bulls intro music to video of the pope exiting the Vatican.

Some joked about replacing communion wafers and wine with tavern-style pizza and Malört. And the Chicago fast food chain Portillo's jested about shipping its Italian beef to Vatican City.

Many users also proclaimed hope the new pope would represent Chicago's history of social justice.

"For Catholic Chicagoans, to have a native son who has been born and raised in a city where support and care of all has always been central to who we are as a city, it really speaks volumes," Perrotti said.

"I truly believe his upbringing in Chicago informs his ministries, his compassion and sense of justice. Now, he can give the world a sense of who we are as a city."

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This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** feature series. [View the full series](#).