

Students walk toward St. Thomas of Villanova Church on the campus of Villanova University near Philadelphia March 11, 2021. (CNS/Chaz Muth)

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by The Associated Press

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When Villanova University's president, Fr. Peter Donohue, was nearing graduation as a theater student, a future pope wasn't far away on campus, studying math two grades below him.

On May 8, church bells rang out for hours in celebration at the Augustinian school near Philadelphia after the 1977 alumnus Cardinal Robert Prevost was elected the first pope from the United States in the history of the Catholic Church.

Fr. John Lydon spent 10 years living with the pope while on a mission in Peru. But back in 1977, Lydon was the student commencement speaker for their arts and sciences class at Villanova, too. He recalled trying to give an uplifting speech, focusing on overcoming indifference.

"I'm sure he doesn't remember that speech, that's so many years ago," Lydon said with a laugh. "But, it just shows you how the grace of God works."

Pope Francis greets Jay and Patricia Wright during a private audience with a delegation from Villanova University.

Jay Wright, then-coach of the Villanova University men's basketball team, with Patricia Wright, presents Pope Francis with a basketball signed by the players who won the 2018 NCAA tournament. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The school on the suburban Main Line near Philadelphia had reached the pinnacle of men's college basketball three times — winning championships in 1985, 2016 and 2018. But celebrating a pope in their ranks was literally unprecedented.

A billboard in Philadelphia showed the pope with a tagline: "From the Main Line to the Divine Line," and the hashtag #WildcatToShepherd. Internet memes turned the pope's Roman numeral V into Villanova's logo and predictions piled up that the New York Knicks and its Villanova-laden lineup have a divine path to this year's title. Augustinian priests on campus are making rounds on the national TV circuit.

"We just all kind of lost it," said Villanova senior Peggy Murray, who met the world leader now known as His Holiness Pope Leo XIV, last year in Rome. "Just screaming and cheering and crying and having this knowledge that we met him. He was humble enough and cared enough about a group of gangly college students that he wanted to say Mass with us and now this is the person who's our pope. I mean it means the world."

Pope Francis poses with a delegation from Villanova University in Pennsylvania during a private audience at the Vatican in 2018. Administrators, top officials and members of the board of trustees from the Augustinian-run Villanova met the pope at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Donohue and the pope were on campus in the mid-1970s at an unsettled time around the end of the Vietnam War, while the Catholic Church had been in a state of change as well, Donohue added. As the campus was gearing up for the 1977 spring graduation, thousands of balloons were released at an event aimed at addressing world hunger, featuring floats, a carnival and the marching band, according to The Villanovan archives. Ads for cassette tapes and a "college disco splash party" flanked stories in the college newspaper.

Prevost has maintained his ties with Villanova over the decades

Prevost graduated from Villanova with a Bachelor of Science in mathematics in 1977 and received an honorary Doctor of Humanities, *honoris causa*, from the university in 2014, Donohue said. Prevost also hosted Villanova officials in Rome that year. Donohue said the pope is a Villanova basketball fan. And Donohue has taken note

that whenever he or the university send out messages, they can check who opens them, and the pope does every time.

"Somebody sent me a text, one of the presidents from another one of the schools, said, 'Three basketball championships and a pope. Do you people have to keep winning?'" Donohue said with a laugh. "It's just different. It certainly has given us a lot of publicity."

Fr. Rob Hagan, known for long serving as Villanova's athletics department chaplain, spent his second year of a spiritual training boot camp of sorts 27 years ago to become an Augustinian. It was in Racine, Wisconsin, a place where through his regional leadership position Prevost would visit newbies like Hagan. He is now the prior provincial at The Augustinian Province of St. Thomas of Villanova.

"I saw him as kind of a mentor. You didn't have to be in his presence very long before you understood how exceptionally bright he is," Hagan said. "And yet, coupled with a real warmth and approachability."

Lydon, who lived with the future pope in Peru, said he is an excellent singer, likes to cook and adopted Alianza Lima as his soccer team. Even when they both attended Villanova, he was a "model of what one would want in a future priest," said Lydon, who is now stationed in Chicago.

"He was always a very bright person, but a humble person, one that you could easily talk to about anything, a person very devoted to his faith," Lydon said.

Advertisement

A pillar is visible in front of St. Thomas of Villanova Church on the campus of Villanova University.

A pillar is visible in front of St. Thomas of Villanova Church at Villanova. (OSV News /CNS file, Chaz Muth)

Professor says Prevost 'never lost the pastoral touch'

Kevin Hughes, a theology and religious studies professor at Villanova, said Thursday that he and several people who were in his office went silent when they heard the news because they couldn't believe Prevost — an American — had been chosen.

Hughes described Prevost as a very gentle soul and somebody who knows how to connect with people.

"When you're talking to him, he gives you his full attention," he said. "I think he's a very intelligent person. I think he's very well read. But he's never lost the pastoral touch."

Prevost, 69, is a member of the Augustinian religious order and was formerly the prior general, or leader. The Order of St. Augustine was formed in the 13th century as a community of "mendicant" friars — dedicated to poverty, service and evangelization.

The requirements and ethos of the order are traced to the fifth century St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the theological and devotional giants of early Christianity. Villanova is one of two Catholic, Augustinian higher learning institutions in the U.S., according to its website. Villanova is rooted in the values of truth, unity, and love, inspired by the teachings of St. Augustine.

Villanova was founded in 1842 and boasts an environment in which students learn to think critically, act compassionately and succeed while serving others. About 6,700 undergraduates and 3,100 graduate and law students are enrolled at the university. Other notable people who attended Villanova include former first lady Jill Biden, actor Bradley Cooper, recording artists Jim Croce and Toby Keith, and basketball stars such as Jalen Brunson, Josh Hart and Mikal Bridges of the Knicks.

But for a Catholic university, nothing could surpass teaching a pope.

"I think anybody that has any familiarity with Villanova knows the kind of emphasis that we give in terms of community and building community," Donohue said. "I think that will be very much a part of what he is. It's part of who he is, it's part of his life as an Augustinian."

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