



Diocese of Ossory

Pope Leo XIV: the early signs of his priorities

The goodwill evident towards Pope Leo XIV as he begins his papal ministry is palpable nationally and internationally.

Following Pope Francis, a pope whose words and example had cut through not just to Catholics but to other Christians and people of goodwill everywhere, is no easy task. Reading what the new pope has said to date in his first homilies as we search for clues to what his priorities will be, it is clear that he shares with Pope Francis a capacity to be both direct and edgy in his comments.

Already, Pope Leo XIV has offered a tantalising spiritual diagnosis of a Church in tension, navigating an age marked by high levels of secularism, scepticism and rapid change. As this new papacy begins, it is clear that Catholicism faces a series of intertwined challenges and opportunities that will define not just the new pope's legacy, but the trajectory of global Catholic faith in the twenty-first century.

Perhaps the most urgent issue Pope Leo XIV has mentioned so far, and on which he is very clear, especially for us in the West, is what he calls 'practical atheism': a subtle, pervasive turning away from Christ by those who outwardly still identify as Catholic, but whose living of the faith rarely strays beyond its cultural trappings. This might mean an engagement with faith that extends no further than presenting children for Baptism, First Holy Communion and Confirmation. But with no follow through in life – not an uncommon pattern in Ireland today!

In his inaugural homily, Pope Leo strikingly noted that Jesus is increasingly perceived (in the West) not as the Son of God but merely as a historical figure or moral teacher. This hollowing-out of faith threatens the Church not through open hostility, but through quiet indifference.

For Pope Leo XIV, the challenge is clear: Catholics and all Christians need to recover a living faith that shapes daily life, not just cultural identity. There needs to be a fundamental re-centring of Catholic life on the person of Jesus Christ. This will require a restructuring of parish life and a new emphasis on the work of catechesis (faith learning) throughout Ireland and beyond over the years to come.

I have been struck by Pope Leo's simple but profoundly important insistence that 'We are not saved by buildings or institutions', beautiful as so many of our great cathedrals and churches are. With great clarity he reminds us that 'The Church survives on the holiness of her people.' This diagnosis points to a second, inward challenge: credibility. In the wake of rapid secularisation and the abuse scandals, not least here in Ireland, the moral authority of the Church has been weakened. But this crisis opens a path: if the Church is to regain trust, it must be a Church that leads by example through humility, service and authentic discipleship.



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Happily, the new pope has underlined the importance of the synodal pathway initiated by Pope Francis which is so important to this work.

As the first American and, in truth, because of his long association with Peru, the second Latin American pope, Leo XIV's own life journey reflects the increasingly global face of Catholicism. It is most certainly no longer a primarily European or North American experience. With decades of missionary work in Peru, he brings direct experience of the Church's vitality in the Global South where growth, poverty and spiritual hunger coexist. This shift is both challenge and gift. The theological and institutional centre of the Church may still be in Europe (Rome), but the energy, vocations and demographic future of Catholicism now lie in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

The opportunity for Pope Leo XIV is to empower more fully the Church in the 'peripheries', a theme mentioned so often by Pope Francis. A Church truly global in voice and vision could be more resilient, diverse and spiritually enriching. Already we see in Ireland that parishes which are multicultural are often profoundly enriched by the enhanced energy and focus that the new communities bring to our country and its life of faith.

Finally, Pope Leo XIV has inherited a Church caught between maintaining timeless truths and engaging with rapidly evolving cultural, technological and political realities. Issues from artificial intelligence to climate change, from war in Ukraine, India and Pakistan to famine in Gaza, from gender ideology to religious freedom, require a Church that is intellectually serious, discerning and spiritually grounded.

Following in the footsteps of Leo XIII (pope 1878-1903) a namesake known for his groundbreaking work on Catholic social teaching by which he spoke for downtrodden workers and condemned unfettered capitalism - Pope Leo XIV has signalled openness both to renewal in the Catholic Church and of service beyond its boundaries to the world. The opportunity is immense: to offer not aloofness nor reaction, but a constructive Catholic vision of human dignity, community and meaning in a fragmented age.

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