

Pope Leo XIV on what he loves about America

by Gerard O'Connell

America magazine July 30, 2026



Pope Leo XIV speaks at the "Canticle of Peace" event in the Vatican Gardens in Castel Gandolfo on the evening of July 29, 2026, featuring a performance by Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli and a 164-member children's choir. Credit: OSV News photo/Matteo Pernaselci, Vatican Media

Leo XIV, [the first American pope](#), spoke about his immigrant roots, his love for the United States and the possibility of visiting the country soon in a brief, [exclusive interview](#) with NBC News on the evening of July 29.

He spoke after participating in a concert for peace at Borgo Laudato Si' on the grounds of the papal summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, overlooking Lake Albano, south of Rome. The concert featured

Andrea Bocelli together with an interfaith choir of 200 children from conflict-affected regions, including the Holy Land, celebrating peace and hope in the year that commemorates the 800th anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi.

NBC's anchor, Tom Llamas, began by asking the pope how important it is for him to be an American and what he loves about America. The Chicago-born pope, who took Peruvian citizenship when he became bishop in Peru, began by clarifying how he relates his nationality to the papacy.

"I think of myself more as the pope who happens to be American," he said. But he insisted that saying that is "not to belittle what it means to be American." He continued: "I was born in the United States, my family is still in the United States. I have great love for America. But I understand my mission, having a very important mission, being pastor of a global church and having a voice and opportunity to speak to people throughout the world. So, I will put things in that order."

"At the same time," Leo acknowledged, "for myself and for the people of the United States, judging by the response we've seen since May 8 of last year, that there is great significance in being the first American pope."

Speaking of what he loves about America, Pope Leo said: "So many things...what America stands for, the sense of freedom, the sense of opportunity, the sense of having invited, for generations, people from around the world to be part of America."

He went on to recall that, like so many Americans, he, too, is a descendant of immigrants. "My grandparents were immigrants," Leo

said. “On my mother’s side, we have people who were both slaves and slave owners.”

In many ways, Leo could be said to be the immigrant pope par excellence given his genealogical roots, as presented by his Spanish biographer, Rafael Lazcano O.S.A., in *Biografía de León XIV: El Papa agustino, peregrino hacia Dios*, published by San Pablo, Madrid, in 2025. In this biography, Father Lazcano, a classmate of Robert Prevost at Santa Monica, the Augustinian International House in Rome, presents the wide diversity of Leo’s origins. The pope’s mother, Mildred Agnes Martínez, a native of Chicago, was the daughter of Joseph Norval Martínez—a Black or African man born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, who emigrated to the United States in 1868 and worked as a cigar maker, and of Louise Baquiex, who was born in New Orleans and is listed as Black in the 1900 census.

He reports that current research shows that Pope Leo’s “cultural, social and ethnic roots” extend to France (40 identified ancestors), Italy (24), the United States (22), Spain (21), Cuba (10), Canada (6), Haiti (1) and Guadeloupe (1). Indeed, Father Lazcano writes, “Genealogical research indicates that among León XIV’s ancestors there were Creoles, Mulattos, whites, Blacks, enslaved people, and slave owners.” Furthermore, “the genealogical work of [Henry Louis] Gates and other researchers reveals, as a starting point for understanding Robert Prevost, that at least 17 of his ancestors were of African descent, hailing from various parts of the world.”



An American flag is displayed as Pope Leo XIV, formerly Cardinal Robert F. Prevost, waves as he arrives to celebrate his inauguration Mass at the Vatican May 18, 2025. (OSV News photo/Andy Abeyta, Reuters)

Mr. Llamas concluded the brief interview by asking the question so many Americans, including the country's 73 million Catholics, are asking: Does Leo have any plans to visit the United States? Pope Leo confirmed that he has this in mind without giving a date, saying, "They will see me there." He revealed that "by coincidence, today we were looking at the calendar for the next couple of years," but added, "Nothing is set in stone yet, but I certainly hope to be there soon."

America understands from informed sources that if he were to visit the United States "in the next couple of years," it would be in 2027

rather than in 2028, since according to Vatican protocol, the pope does not visit a country in an election year, and 2028 would be the year of the next presidential election. But the same sources confirm that no decision has been made yet.

What we do know is that he will visit [Uruguay, Argentina and Peru](#) in November of this year, and next year, in August, he will visit South Korea for World Youth Day.

In a follow-up interview in Spanish with Telemundo, Pope Leo reflected on the beauty he had just witnessed at the concert for peace as children from around the world sang together. “That beauty, I believe, was an invitation to all of us to look beyond and see the beauty that can be created—or in which we can participate—when we set aside some of our differences and recognize the richness of being human, of all having been created in the image of God,” he said.

From the beginning of his pontificate, the American pope has called for peace and an end to the wars that are causing such death, destruction and havoc, especially in the Holy Land, Lebanon, Iran, the wider Middle East, Ukraine, Myanmar, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Last evening, speaking to Telemundo, Leo recalled that the children who sang and prayed for peace raised the question of why there is war and hatred instead of peace and love, and said, “We need to rediscover the values and the treasure found in being human, in all being brothers and sisters.”

“We must recognize that we can all truly participate in a society that loves peace, seeks peace, and accepts one another despite our differences,” Pope Leo said. “If we all work for peace, we can overcome so many situations that cause conflict and hatred.”

He concluded the Spanish-language interview with a message regarding migrants, many of whom come from South America and are now living in fear of being deported from the United States. “Have hope. Certainly, seek ways to live in an orderly manner,” he said.

“We must recognize that there may be people who—I don’t know—have suffered because of offenses, crimes and things of that kind. A society cannot be built that way,” he said.

He concluded: “We must therefore learn to live in peace, but we must also have the courage and the hope that always help us all.”



Gerard O'Connell

Gerard O'Connell is **America's** senior Vatican correspondent and author of *The Election of Pope Francis: An Inside Story of the Conclave That Changed History*. He has been covering the Vatican since 1985.