

Cardinal McElroy on Pope Leo's missionary past and if Trump influenced the conclave

An interview with Gerard O'Collins

When the 133 cardinals from 70 countries gathered in conclave to elect the new pope, “the primary lens through which most electors viewed [Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost] was as a missionary,” not his nationality.

That was what Cardinal Robert McElroy, the archbishop of Washington, told **America's** Vatican correspondent in this interview in Rome on May 19, the day after the Mass for the inauguration of Pope Leo XIV as the 266th successor of St. Peter.

The San Francisco-born Cardinal McElroy was one of ten cardinals from the United States that voted in the conclave to elect the first American pope. Pope Francis appointed this graduate of Harvard, Stanford and the Pontifical Gregorian University as bishop of San Diego in March 2015, created him cardinal in May 2022 and named him archbishop of Washington on Jan. 6, 2025.

In this interview, Cardinal McElroy rejected the suggestion by some commentators that the cardinals had voted for an anti-Trump pope. “President Trump had zero bearing on the conclave,” he said. “He simply wasn't part of the conversation in any way when it came to electing Pope Leo.”

On the other hand, he said, “a major factor” in his election was the conviction among the cardinals that he would “carry forward” the trajectory of Pope Francis “in its essential elements.” Cardinal McElroy added, “He'll emphasize some different things, but the substance of Francis' pontificate will endure.”

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

In a previous interview, you said it was impossible to have an American pope. How did it happen?

I always felt it would be impossible to have an American pope because the U.S. has such tremendous military, economic and cultural power in the world that there would be resistance to the church being seen as American, even

symbolically. But once we were inside the conclave, that ceased to be an impediment for several reasons.

One is that Pope Leo has spent so much of his life outside the U.S.—in Latin America, globally with his Augustinian community and now here in Rome. More importantly, however, it was the way he carries himself and how he has served the wider church, particularly through his identity as a missionary. The prism through which the cardinal electors viewed him wasn't nationality; it was missionary identity.

When electors evaluated different candidates and their qualities, his nationality didn't define him. They didn't see him as American or Peruvian. They saw him as a missionary. That was the central lens through which most electors understood his life, priesthood and ministry. And that identity resonates particularly in continuity with Francis' teaching, in which missionary discipleship is the core identity for all Catholics. So I think that lens diminished much of the resistance that his American identity might have provoked in another context.

How long have you known him personally?

Only for a few years, since he's been in Rome.

So you met him when he was already prefect?

Yes. I had seen him before, but I wouldn't say I knew him before that. I had some awareness of him through the Augustinians, because they're present in San Diego, but not much.

However, I had many conversations with him about particular appointments and other issues that came up. My first contact with him was actually over a complicated issue I encountered when I arrived in San Diego. It wasn't a moral issue, but it was a complex financial one.

He called me immediately. We had a good conversation. I later wrote him a five-page, single-spaced letter detailing the situation. The following week, I saw him at the synod, and he told me he had received it. He had read it—and understood it. That told me a lot: first, that he's a worker; second, that he took the time to read it himself; and third, that he understood a very complicated issue.

Maybe because he studied mathematics?

That may well be. But to me, that whole experience said a lot. He called right

away to communicate clearly and constructively. He read something that wasn't the biggest deal in the world, and he fully grasped it. That showed real diligence and clarity.

How would you describe him?

He's very faith-filled. And he has a truly global view of the church because of his broad experiences. The Latin American lens on mission and social analysis, rooted in the tradition of Aparecida, is central to him. Aparecida is not dead in this pontificate. It's foundational for him, as it was in a different but parallel way for Francis.

That whole development of Latin American theology—which, in my opinion, has been the most fruitful theological work in the world over the past 30 years—is not going to be sidelined. It's part of who he is. And then there's his Augustinian identity; that comes through as well.

Do American bishops see him as an “American bishop”?

To understand that, I think we need a multidimensional framework. Leo should be understood in many dimensions, not just in binary terms like “American” or “Peruvian” or “Vatican citizen.”

I don't think he'll be seen as an “American bishop” in a narrow sense. But in terms of understanding the realities of life in the U.S.—the episcopal conference, the day-to-day life of U.S. bishops—that could be an asset. There'll be a sense of affinity: They'll feel he understands their world.

What was the reaction to his election in the United States? Were Americans enthusiastic about an American pope?

Very positive. Among most American Catholics, I think there's a sense that anything is possible now. Some of the conflicts we've had may now soften. I don't think it will end polarization in the church—that's not realistic—but it might help reduce it, and provide a path toward a more muted, lessened polarization.

Do you see him as continuing the path of Francis?

Very much so. That was a major factor in the conclave. I think many cardinals, and ultimately the majority, saw him as someone who could carry forward that trajectory in its essential elements. He'll have a different personality than Pope Francis and will emphasize some different things, but the substance of Francis' pontificate will endure; for example, synodality, the emphasis on missionary discipleship and the image of the church as a field hospital. Francis captured

those in powerful, memorable phrases: “Who am I to judge?” and others. I think those core elements will continue. Another is Curia reform.

In 2013, ahead of the conclave, there was a strong call for Curia reform. Did that come up again?

Yes, it’s become a recurring and deepening theme, especially with the financial challenges facing the Holy See. One of the most immediate changes under Francis was cultural. In the dicasteries, particularly during ad limina visits, a new tone emerged. The message was: “We’re here to help you. We’re collaborators with the bishops, not judges.”

That shift happened quickly—and profoundly. In 2013, our U.S. delegation’s ad limina had a very different tone from our 2019 visit. That’s a cultural shift, not just structural. Reforming the Curia isn’t only about how departments are organized; it’s about how they relate to bishops and local churches.

Did this renewed call for reform also emerge in terms of Vatican finances, that not enough has changed?

That’s right; it didn’t work. The sense among many cardinals and bishops is that those structural reforms haven’t succeeded in reshaping the Vatican’s financial life.

There’s more transparency, but there’s still favoritism and elements of nepotism. And we’re headed in a bad direction financially. That’s been evident for some time, and it’s only gotten clearer with recent revelations.

When Pope Francis appointed you as archbishop of Washington, some read it as a move against President Trump. Now we have an American pope, and some also see it the same way because of his remarks about immigrants. How do you think Pope Leo will relate to President Trump?

First, I can say with certainty: President Trump had zero bearing on the conclave. None. Not at any level—not even as a background reference. He simply wasn’t part of the conversation in any way when it came to electing Pope Leo.

As for how the pope will deal with political matters, that’s different. There are institutional relationships to manage, of course. But the more important issue is what we, as church leaders, must bear witness to. Some elements of current U.S. government policy deeply undermine Catholic teaching.

And the pope will speak to that, not because it's about the U.S. but because these are global issues: migration, international aid, human dignity. They may be particularly urgent in the American context right now, but they're not only American concerns.

Do you expect him to visit the U.S.?

I think he will, at some point. I'd be surprised if it happened early in his pontificate, but I believe he will come—and he'll be warmly welcomed. It would be a tremendous moment.

So now we have, not just an American pope but an “American pope for the Americas.” What are your hopes?

I return to the five key contributions of Francis' pontificate: missionary discipleship, synodality, the rejection of judgmentalism, the field hospital model of the church and the desire to embed all of these in the church's culture.

I believe Pope Leo will carry these contributions forward and help integrate them more deeply into the global church. Some regions—especially in Latin America—are already well ahead in this regard; many of these impulses originated there or found concrete expression there. And I hope he'll also find new ways to build bridges and address the collapse of human connection that we're seeing globally—the breakdown of relationships and unity.

And the question of peace?

It's enormously difficult. But I think he'll work tirelessly on it—because we're a very broken world.

What was the experience of the conclave like for you?

For me, it was like a mini-retreat. I wish it had been longer. I expected it to be fascinating, but it was much more than that—it was an experience of grace.

When we processed into the Sistine Chapel, with the choir singing the litany of the saints, you're acutely aware of being in communion with all the generations before you—and of standing before the Last Judgment, which looms so powerfully on the wall. My seat was directly under the Creation of Adam, and to my right was the Last Judgment. It was a deeply spiritual moment.

At a certain point, analytical thinking ceased to matter. A spiritual movement took over. The presence of God was palpable.

By the time of the final vote, everyone knew what was coming. You walk up, holding your ballot, place it on the paten and tip it into the urn. People were beaming with joy. Even those who'd come in planning to vote for others were smiling, moved by the clarity of what was emerging. It was a profound spiritual gift for all of us.

What did you feel when the 89th vote was secured?

Each cardinal had a notepad with all the names, to keep track. We turned them in at the end, but during the process, we all knew when the threshold was approaching. It wasn't a surprise. We applauded when the 89th vote was confirmed, but the reality had already been building before that.



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