



A Short Note

'PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR PEACE': Tracing The Trajectory of A Pontificate, Pope Leo XIV

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Each Pontificate is marked by its peculiar socio-political and historical milieu. Thus far, what the nascent pontificate of Leo XIV heralds is borne out of the context of the present state of volatility in the world that is enmeshed in wars and crises across the continents.

Pax. The very first words pronounced by Pope Leo XIV from the *loggia of St. Peter's Basilica*, Rome, on May 8, 2025, alongside the choice of name are no mere coincident. One hundred and twenty-two years ago marked the end of the pontificate of Leo XIII who raised the Catholic Social Doctrine to a new pedestal and made it central to the mission of the Church *ad gentes* while making it to remain in the consciousness of the Church in her identity. Then came Leo XIV pronouncing "peace to the world" as his first message which is undoubtedly loaded with meaning and equally symbolic.

Following his greeting of peace, Leo XIV already sets the tone of his pontificate. The greeting was not necessarily inspired by the liturgical season of Eastertide. It was inspired by the Risen Lord himself who offered the gift of peace as his first gift after his resurrection, the new pontiff explained moments later in his scripted speech.

More than a mere salutation, Leo XIV's greeting was a loud reverberation of John XXIII's clarion call in *Pacem in Terris* way back in 1962. The underlying message here is the veritable testimony of the role of the successor of Blessed Peter (and the petrine office), the vicar of Christ who is charged to strengthen the other members

of Christ's mystical body. This testimony also embodies the giving of hope in the face of despair, violence, wars and all that militate against the peace the Risen Lord has bequeathed to his Church and humanity. Early on in the pontificate of Leo XIV, through this potent gesture, testimony to the Gospel of peace is confirmed as an integral part of the exercise of the divinely ordained primacy of the petrine office.

Thus, Leo XIV rightly perceived his pontificate coming at a point in time when the world is groaning and asphyxiated due to the dearth of peace and harmony in the world. The world is groaning in pains due to what his predecessor, Pope Francis had described as the “the third world war” being fought in “piecemeal.”

If the choice of name suggests and serves as a lead to the peculiar character of this pontificate, it sets to highlight and give a certain pre-eminence to Catholic social consciousness in the Church in her mission to the world. Leo XIV, *ab initio*, has presented the Gospel of Peace as the central message of his pontificate.

Building on and progressing from this foundation, Leo XIV at every forum has continued to reiterate the need for “all” to begin to work for peace in the world, especially, when addressing the major actors of flashpoints of crises and wars.

In line with the already established principles of Catholic Social Doctrine, Leo XIV teaches that peace is linked to love and justice, and maintains that peace is key to resolving systemic injustices, hunger, underdevelopment, violence, economic inequality and other social ills that he calls, “collective moral failure.” Peace begins in the heart of the individual. It is the “disarmament” of the heart by letting go of hatred, animosity and vendetta. He wants young people to be particularly involved in peace-building by eschewing egocentric tendencies and start embracing dialogue, fraternity and

reconciliation. Peace cannot come from the use of force to dominate. Leo XIV proposes the need to have institutions of peace in the fields of education, in the economic arena and on the social fronts in order to support the culture of peace and life where harmony and conviviality can thrive.

“Architects of Peace.” In his appeal to all Christians to embrace reconciliation and work for peace while addressing an ecumenical gathering in the Vatican on August 22, 2025, Leo XIV recognizes and reminds Christians of their identity and vocation to be “apostles of peace.” The theological implications of these are telling. Christianity as a religion that stems from Christ is irreconcilable with division. Christians on no account should be promoters of division. The presence of division in the body of Christ is a scandal and cannot be justified. Has Christ himself not warned us that our unity will help the cause of our mission while our division will be a counter-witnessing (cf. John 17).

“Preferential Option for Peace.” What hitherto has been a popular and cornerstone of Catholic Social Doctrine, is the principle of the “preferential option for the poor.” Today, with Leo XIV, there is an inadvertent projection of a new emphasis in Catholic Social consciousness: the “preferential option for peace”! This preferential option for peace does not upstage the preferential option for the poor. They are complementary. Indeed, the preferential option for the poor remains a prerequisite for the preferential option for peace.

“A Significant Echo for the Consecrated Life.” As an Augustinian, the invitations to peace surely carry particular significance for Leo XIV who in the course of his life, must have been familiar with Ecclesiastical documents that invite Consecrated persons to be agents of peace by virtue of their consecration. His predecessor, Paul VI, had already invited Consecrated persons in

Evangelica Testificatio to see in their consecrated chastity, a source of deep peace (*Evang. Test.* 13). This document on the renewal of the Religious life, envisions the Consecrated person of our times as an individual with a deep-seated love for peace whose simplicity and humility provide the foundations for a spontaneous freedom and obedience where this peace is made manifest (*Evang. Test.* 31). In *Vita Consacrata*, Pope St John Paul II proposed fraternal love of brothers and sisters to Consecrated persons as the first form of evangelization geared towards interreligious dialogue (*Vita Cons.* 102). The Consecrated person should possess a shared concern for life in cooperation with other religions in issues bordering on justice and peace (*Vita Cons.* 102). These documents relate to a background of consciousness for peace for all Christian faithful already contained in the Social Doctrine. However, they make peace even more exigent and compelling for Consecrated religious in a way which is specific to their vocation.

Pope Leo XIV's pontificate is nascent, under a year old, but the strong and eloquent pastoral trajectory points to a pontificate that will bless the Church with a legacy anchored on irenic credentials. Meanwhile, let the voice of Leo XIV continue to resound and echo to the ends of the earth and to every heart.