News

Sisters gather outside the Basilica of St. Mary Major, the site of Francis' tomb, May 9. The excitement of the recent election of Pope Leo XIV was still palpable among the sister leaders, who were together during the UISG general assembly when they heard the news. (GSR photo/Soli Salgado)

by Soli Salgado

View Author Profile
ssalgado@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Rome — May 12, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

At the very moment the white smoke appeared from the Sistine Chapel, some 900 sister leaders from around the world had just received Communion.

They had spent the last few days together at Ergife Palace Hotel, the site of the five-day general assembly for the International Union of Superiors General, or UISG. Throughout their plenary, the sisters had prayed for the cardinals in the papal conclave.

And on the evening of May 8, one sister decided to check her phone after the Eucharist. Soon, joyous commotion rippled through the hotel ballroom at the news of a new pope – communal elation erupted with dancing and singing, even before the assembled learned that Cardinal Robert Prevost had become pope.

"There was a rumble on the side – obviously someone had seen the white smoke," recalled Sr. Josephine Kane, superior general of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions New Zealand. "Then suddenly the whole group erupted into singing 'Alleluia,' the musicians were beating the drums and singing, and it was just fantastic."

For most of the sisters, the serendipitous timing of this long-planned UISG assembly, held May 5-9, coinciding with a papal election was impossible to shake – that it was no accident but rather a sign of the Holy Spirit at work.

Many bolted for St. Peter's Square at the news of white smoke, making their way into the crowds just in time to witness the pope's first blessing. Others chose to stay at the Ergife, savoring the moment as a group and watching it unfold on television.

But whether they encountered Pope Leo XIV from afar on the square or via the big screen, all saw a fellow religious who understands community; a missionary who shares the values of Pope Francis; a friend to Catholic sisters; and the leader many said is the one the church needs now.

"He understands religious life, and he knows women religious," said Sr. Pat Murray, executive secretary of UISG, highlighting that he comes from the Augustinian

tradition, one shared with many sisters.

Leo’s brief time as a cardinal – Francis appointed him in 2023 – already demonstrates a promising record when it comes to relationships with women in the church. Murray, an Irish Loreto sister, noted that the then-Cardinal Prevost chose three women – one of whom is a Catholic sister – to be part of the commission that appoints new bishops.

Shortly after learning a new pope had been elected while at the UISG general assembly, Sr. Sue Ernster (president of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration) and Sr. Joanne Schatzlein, (president of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi), both from Wisconsin, went to St. Peter's Square to witness Pope Leo XIV's first appearance. (GSR photo/Soli Salgado)

The new pontiff: a fellow religious

On the last day of the UISG assembly, participants concluded their time together with Mass and a visit to Pope Francis's tomb at the Papal Basilica of Saint Mary Major in Rome – a moment that was by turns somber and stirring, moving and hopeful.

Having a day to reflect on the selection of a new pope, assembly participants said they were happy, even overjoyed, by the news of the selection of Pope Leo XIV.

One of them was Sr. Maria Cimperman, the synodality coordinator for UISG. She has personal ties with the new pope. As a professor of theological ethics and consecrated life at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Cimperman knows the new pontiff because he was asked to be on an advisory board for a CTU center on consecrated life.

That is one connection; another is that Prevost, like Cimperman, was a participant at last year's synod on synodality.

"I'd see him there and talk," Cimperman told Global Sisters Report in an interview outside Saint Mary Major. Upon hearing his name on May 8, "[I] realized he was going to be pope. I was overjoyed because he would be in the flow of Francis, he would be synodal."

"Already in that dicastery they have women participating with bishops," she said of Leo's Vatican experience. "He listens. He knows religious life. He's a different personality than Pope Francis. He's a little more reserved – but he's so sharp on things, he notices, he's gentle."

Reflecting on the talk of whether a new pontiff would be either in the line of Francis or a "correction," Cimperman said Pope Leo would "bring what the movement of synodality has been" – what she called a "movement of participation."

"He brings a spiritual dimension, of course. And he will bring in an Augustinian charism. And I think he's been part of helping the pope and others discern bishops, so he understands the church's challenges and kind of the beauty of it."

Leo's affiliation with consecrated life as an Augustinian friar came as welcome news to Sr. Mary Catherine Redmond, president of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, based in New Windsor, New York.

"When you look at his experience in Peru, of being a congregational leader, being part of a congregation, the value of being a member of a community, brings a

different dimension to the papacy," she said.

Redmond added that there might be an element of "American healing" in the selection of Leo.

Choking up at the memory, Redmond said when she later read the pope's first address, she felt "as an American, this is one way to start to heal the devastation and the hurt that has gone on throughout the world because of the actions of our government. And for the church, his welcoming spirit, I am so glad that we will continue to welcome and break boundaries and to go to the margins."

As the crowds dispersed on St. Peter's Square after Pope Leo XIV made his first appearance as pontiff, sisters who were in town for the UISG plenary visit with one another soaking in the excitement of the announcement. (GSR photo/Soli Salgado)

Sr. Sue Ernster, president of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and who met the new pontiff in 2024, called his selection "unbelievable."

"He understands religious life, and he is going to keep us faithful to the Gospel. He is so centered on God," Ernster said in St. Peter's Square shortly after Leo made his first appearance as pope.

"What I'm looking forward to is being essential and keeping to the Gospel – always the Gospel values – and [affirming] human dignity and treating people with respect. I think he will hold all of us to a higher level."

Continuity with Francis

Interviewed alongside Ernster at St. Peter's Square, Sr. Joanne Schatzlein, president of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi from Milwaukee, said, "I just feel like Pope Francis has to be so pleased. I think he was concerned with his vision and his legacy living on."

That was a theme suggested by Murray, who said she felt that Leo is "almost bridging two worlds – Pope Francis who came from [the] global south, and Pope Leo who comes from [the] global north but [has] lived in [the] global south for many years."

She sees a "new kind of continuity because that's the message for the future."

"We have to come together for the global church," Murray told GSR, "north and south, east and west, his call for peace, his call for unity, for reaching out together in a missionary spirit. For me, it was very nurturing for us as religious women because we do have a longing for continuity for what Francis had begun. And I think we see it in Pope Leo. That continuity will [still] be there."

Kane said she is confident the new pope will follow in the footsteps of Pope Francis.

"So, please God that [that] will happen, and we can have a really vibrant loving church that's for the poor and marginalized and inclusive of all people. Immigration, synodality, all those things, uplifting women's leadership in the church. [It has been] wonderful to be with others that think similarly. We pray that he will be a good pastor and good shepherd."

Murray said it is important not to lose sight of the uniquely spiritual importance of the last week.

"In this very modern techy world, here we are with the chimney and white smoke," she said.

"We have to remember how important symbols are, and this is a sign of continuity, of a leadership that goes back to St. Peter, and that's been handed on. There's a tradition. So on the one hand, we're honoring the tradition of the church, and on the other hand, we're talking about the church facing outwards and meeting the needs of the world today. And it's that kind of balance that I think Pope Leo will have."

Sr. Rosana Lazaga, a Filipina sister and superior general of Ursuline Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in Italy, took note of the Holy Spirit, too.

"I [can't] imagine how the Holy Spirit works because I never heard his [Cardinal Prevost's] name among the candidates. But he's a man of the time."

"I'm still savoring that joy," she said, recalling a celebratory cake among sisters and also joining the crowd at St. Peter's.

"I could feel the joy of everyone. I could really see the hand of God in the church. It's really moving. I hope to share this with everyone, that our God is a living God, an Easter God. He is risen."

Advertisement

GSR International Correspondent Chris Herlinger in New York contributed to this report.