How an African saint has shaped Pope Leo's worldview

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BY CATHERINE CONYBEARE

Pope Leo XIV's first official trip to Africa started with a fascinating stop in Algeria. Here, the pontiff's visit to the Grand Mosque of Algiers was an attempt to strengthen Christian-Muslim relations. The stop was also to pay homage to Saint Augustine, founder of the order that he is a member of.

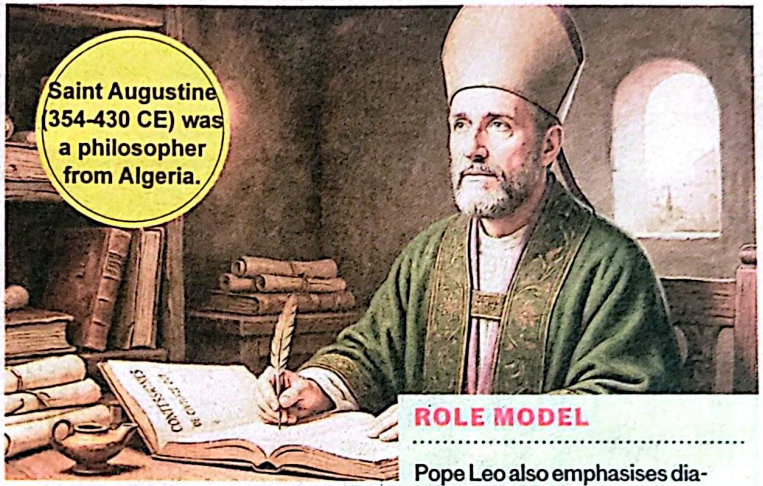
Who was Saint Augustine?

Saint Augustine (354-430 CE) was a rhetorician (persuasive speaker) and philosopher from what is now Algeria. He was educated in north Africa and rose to the rank of official orator at the court of the emperor in Milan, and then, after years of spiritual searching, underwent a dramatic conversion to Christianity and returned to north Africa.

There, he was ordained first as priest then as bishop in the coastal city of Hippo, modern Annaba, where a magnificent Roman site remains to this day. He spent the rest of his life in Hippo, teaching, preaching, debating, and writing his magnificent works of theology.

He is perhaps best known for his Confessions, an extended work of prayer, autobiography and theological reflection, all addressed to God. But there are other crucial works as well, including *The City of God*, *On the Trinity*, and the *Literal Meaning of Genesis*. Altogether, they make him one of the most important figures in the foundation of the Christian church, and one of the greatest theologians ever, if not the greatest.

Augustine remains highly significant in the history of Western thought, even beyond his theological contributions. His ideas on time, memory, language, the interpretation of texts, political theory, and the writing of history itself are all fundamental to thinkers working in these fields. He has influenced successors, from the Italian poet Petrarch and German theologian Martin Luther to the Austrian-born British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and German-born US historian and thinker Hannah Arendt.



Why is Augustine so important to Pope Leo XIV?

Pope Leo XIV is a member of the Augustinian Order, founded in the 13th Century, eight centuries after Augustine's death. In his very first speech from the balcony in St Peter's Square, the pope described himself as "a son of Saint Augustine". He is the first Augustinian pope, possibly because Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, was also an Augustinian, and the governing body of the Roman Catholic church has avoided electing a pope from the order.

But beyond his affiliation to the Augustinian order, the pope shows deep affinities, both intellectual and spiritual, with Saint Augustine. Pope Leo's emphasis on love and peace, which we hear in every public utterance, brings him close to his theologian predecessor. Augustine put love at the heart of his theology, even arguing that love in the human realm is a sign of God.

Augustine argued that this desire corrupts and ruins those who structure their lives around it, even worse than the damage they do to the dominated. Above all, Augustine is remarkable for his intellectual humility. He put searching and questioning, as opposed to seeking dogmatic answers, at the heart of his theology. This too is a signal characteristic of Pope Leo.

Why is it important to reclaim him as an African?

It tips the view of the world towards the global south, and specifically to Africa, whose significance is so often overlooked in our narratives of intellectual history. Moreover, the fact that he was both African and Roman gave him a distinctive insider/outsider view of the Roman empire. He had a thorough Roman education and excelled in Latin, philosophy, and rhetoric. At the same time, all his closest friends and associates were also from Africa. When he set out to critique the empire in his book The City of God, he saw the empire from an oblique angle, with guarded admiration but without complacency.

ROLE MODEL

Pope Leo also emphasises dialogue, and dialogue was at the heart of how Augustine practised both philosophy and theology. The way in which the pope expresses his thoughts in the language of the Bible is also deeply Augustinian: Augustine's works are often so deeply interwoven with scriptural language that it is hard to tell where the Bible ends and his original words begin.

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