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Democracy Dies in Darkness

SUNDAY, MAY 18, 2025 • \$6

Catholics hope Leo is boon for the faith

Pontiff appears to gain traction within a divided church, early signs show

BY ANTHONY FAIOLA
AND MICHELLE BOORSTEIN

VATICAN CITY — In just 10 days, he's brought Chicago-bred English to the hallowed Holy See, given a jolt to White Sox merchandising and hosted a global tennis icon. But as the first American pontiff readies for his sacred inauguration Sunday in St. Peter's Square, the burning question for the globe's largest Christian faith is whether Pope Leo XIV can also fill the pews.

There are early signs that Leo is capitalizing on the moment and gaining traction within a divided church: His first Sunday blessing drew 150,000 attendees. At 69, and after a meteoric rise under Pope Francis that saw Leo go from bishop to cardinal to pope within two years, he has brought what observers describe as a more youthful, American brand of energy to an ancient office held for decades by far older men.

For now, Leo is enjoying something of a honeymoon. But it is too early to know precisely what kind of pope he will be.

Pope John Paul II, who was Polish and became the first non-Italian pontiff in four-and-half centuries, for a time ignited a religious renaissance in Eastern Europe and drew rock-star-like crowds from Rio de Janeiro to Manila. His cause against communism revitalized papal authority, though some of the gains he achieved in church attendance, especially in Europe, eventually petered out.

By comparison, Pope Benedict XVI's pontificate was seen as transitional, plagued by mishaps in interfaith relations and encircled at times by scandal. But the German pope still galvanized traditional Catholics while delivering modest annual growth for the church.

Francis, the first Latin American pope and a lightning rod for

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SAUMYA KHANDELWAL/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Amid fragile ceasefire, Kashmir contends with lasting devastation

Civilians grieve as India and Pakistan hail military feats after worst violence in decades

The night of May 8 returns to Sanam Bashir as a jumble of disjointed images. Her family was packed into three cars. The road was so dark, she said, and the artillery fire deafening.

"It felt like the night of judgment," said Bashir, 20, who was huddled in the back seat with her little cousin, 4-year-old Muheeb, her aunt and her mother, Nargis Begum.

Bashir doesn't remember the shrapnel striking the roof of the car, but she can't forget her aunt's sharp cry, or the hot blood that poured from her mother's neck. Begum was dead by the time they reached the hospital.

At least 27 people were killed, including 11-year old twins, and more than 50 injured in the Indian-administered territory of Jammu and Kashmir over four days of fighting between India and Pakistan. The sudden violence was the worst to hit the contested region in decades and, as in previous rounds of conflict, civilians bore the heaviest cost.

Days into a fragile ceasefire, The Washing-

BY NIHA MASIH
AND SHAMS IRFAN
IN URI, INDIAN-
ADMINISTERED KASHMIR

The family of Nargis Begum, who was killed this month, gathers at her home in Rajarwani, in Indian-administered Kashmir, on Thursday.

ton Post visited villages less than 10 miles from the Line of Control — the de facto border that snakes over mountains and across rivers, carving Kashmir in two.

Years of relative calm were shattered last month when militants gunned down 26 civilians near the popular tourist town of Pahalgam, in Indian-administered Kashmir. New Delhi said the attack had links to Pakistan, which it has long accused of supporting violent separatists. Islamabad denied any involvement. The region held its breath.

India's retaliation came on May 7, when it launched its deepest strikes inside Pakistan in more than half a century, killing at least 26 people. For the next three nights, the nuclear-armed neighbors edged ever closer to war — trading strikes on military sites and sending waves of drones into each other's cities. After a U.S.-brokered truce on May 10, both countries trumpeted their military achievements and downplayed their losses.

Along the Line of Control, where families

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Journalists flee El Salvador's crackdown on dissent

Fearing arrest by Bukele's government, staff at the top investigative outlet make a wrenching decision

BY SAMANTHA SCHMIDT

SAN SALVADOR — Their news site had just exposed details of Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele's alleged deals with the country's gangs. Now the three journalists were faced with a choice they had long dreaded.

El Faro — Spanish for light-house — is the premier independent investigative news outlet in El Salvador. The staff had received word that Bukele's increasingly authoritarian government might be preparing warrants to arrest seven of its journalists.

Four of the seven had already left El Salvador. Carlos Barrera, Efrén Lemus and Víctor Peña remained. To stay longer would mean risking arrest. To flee would mean risking detention at the border.

One morning this month, they tried the latter. The trio drove to the border with Guatemala, showed their documents to immigration authorities and were allowed to cross.

"We don't know where we

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DANIELE VOLPE/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

From left, El Faro journalists Víctor Peña, Efrén Lemus and Carlos Barrera after fleeing this month.

Crypto investors seek seat at president's table — and his ear

BY DREW HARWELL,
JEREMY B. MERRILL,
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AND CAROL D. LEONNIG

When the creators of President Donald Trump's meme coin announced last month that its top 220 buyers could join him for dinner at his private golf club outside Washington, the mostly anonymous investors of the Singapore-based crypto collective MemeCore raced to capitalize on the opportunity.

The group of roughly 60 members, many of whom live in China and Southeast Asia, quickly amassed \$18 million worth of the coin, securing a seat at Trump's dinner party Thursday — and contributing a share of millions of dollars in crypto transaction fees the Trump venture has collected since the contest was announced.

The collective intends to send a co-founder to the dinner with hopes of shaping Trump's views on their industry, MemeCore chief business development officer Cherry Hsu said in an interview, identifying the co-founder only by his crypto nickname "Ice."

"Trump is a very iconic meme character," Hsu said, likening him to a viral internet legend. She said the members have joked that they hope the dinner includes Big Macs, famously from the president's preferred fast-food chain.

The gala dinner at the Trump National Golf Club on Thursday will link the president to an unusual collection of deep-pocketed crypto players from around the world, some of whom have told The Washington Post they hope to influence his views on how their industry is regulated or otherwise capitalize on the presidential access.

The identities of the vast majority of the coin holders who were invited to the dinner after the contest ended Monday remain unknown to the public, with many using untraceable crypto wallets fueled by money from unknown sources. And when they meet the president, they may be able to stay that way, with one crypto investor saying he was told by the event's organizers that no cameras or journalists would be allowed in the room.

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The Washington Post / Year 148, No. 54220

