



BOOK REVIEW

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| Book Title: | <i>Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine</i> |
| Editors: | Ikechukwu Anthony KANU, OSA and Emeka Xris OBIEZU, OSA |
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Introduction

The election of Robert Francis Cardinal Prevost, OSA, as Pope Leo XIV on May 8, 2025, marked a turning point in the history of the Catholic Church. For the first time, a son of Saint Augustine, an Augustinian friar, ascended to the Chair of Peter. This historic event has naturally provoked theological, ecclesial, and scholarly reflection. In response, the book, *Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine*, was published under the auspices of Augustinian Publications (Nigeria), edited by Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, OSA and Emeka Xris Obiezu, OSA. The volume gathers contributions from Augustinian scholars and practitioners, most of them Nigerians, who share a common spiritual and intellectual patrimony with the new pontiff.

The title of the book is pragmatic and existential. By calling Leo XIV a “son of Saint Augustine,” the editors signal not merely a biological or institutional affiliation but a spiritual genealogy. As Augustine shaped the intellectual landscape of Latin Christianity through his writings on grace, the Trinity, ecclesiology, and politics, so too, the authors argue, Pope Leo XIV is shaping his papacy on Augustinian principles of interiority, community life, pastoral service, and love. This claim is not without precedent. Throughout history, religious orders have often seen their members’ papal roles as extensions of their charisms, Dominicans with Pope Pius V, Franciscans with Sixtus IV, and Jesuits with Francis. Yet the Augustinian perspective is unique, given the African origin and enduring philosophical influence of Augustine of Hippo, whose restless search for truth continues to inspire theology, philosophy, and ecclesial life.

The present book under review aims to serve two purposes: first, to honour Pope Leo XIV by narrating his life, identity, and vision through an Augustinian lens; and second, to interpret his papacy as an unfolding application of Augustine’s theological and philosophical insights to the challenges of the twenty-first century. As Bishop John Namaza Niyiring, OSA, notes in the “Foreword”, the book presents “a systematic scholarly exploration that introduces Pope Leo XIV to the world from an Augustinian and African perspective,”⁵⁰ while also challenging readers to consider how the dialogue between tradition and modernity can shape the papacy today.

⁵⁰ John Namaza Niyiring, OSA, Foreword to *Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine*, ed. Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, OSA, and Emeka Xris Obiezu, OSA (Jos: Augustinian Publications, 2025), iii.



Overview Of The Book And Context

The book was edited by Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, OSA, Prior Provincial of the Augustinian Province of Nigeria and a leading scholar in African philosophy and theology, and Emeka Xris Obiezu, OSA, Director of the Augustinian Centre for Advocacy, Justice, and Peace. Both editors bring significant academic and pastoral experience to the project, ensuring that the work bridges scholarship and lived ecclesial experience. The contributors were drawn mainly from among Nigerian Augustinians and their collaborators: Charles Chukwuebuka Ugonwafor, OSA; Jude Aniobodom Ossai, OSA; Gabriel Tumba Hassan, OSA; Valentine Aghoghophia Ovie, OSA; and Michael Paul Pilani, among others. Their backgrounds span through philosophy, theology, ecclesiology, missiology, conflict resolution, and African contextual studies, giving the book a multidisciplinary scope. This communal authorship reflects the Augustinian principle of *unitas*, a search for truth and meaning through dialogue in community. The editors explicitly frame the methodology of the book as “the Augustinian model, which makes a difficult synthesis of the fundamental elements of thought and feelings.”⁵¹

The book is divided into three main parts, each corresponding to a dimension of Pope Leo XIV’s self-presentation at his election: identity, ecclesiology, and global vision. The first section explores the personal and spiritual foundations of Pope Leo XIV’s pontificate. Kanu’s chapter on the Pope’s early life, education, and vocation traces his journey from Chicago to Peru, highlighting his exposure to diverse cultures, his engagement with liberation theology, and his years as Prior General of the Augustinian Order.⁵² Another chapter by Kanu, “*Intersection of Pontifical Name and Vision*”, examines the significance of the name *Leo*, connecting Pope Leo XIV to Leo XIII and his groundbreaking encyclical *Rerum Novarum* on labour rights and social doctrine. Ugonwafor’s chapter, “I Am a Son of Saint Augustine,” reflects on the Pope’s explicit self-identification with Augustinian spirituality. A final chapter of Part I by Kanu, “*I Am ... an Augustinian*”, deepens this analysis, emphasizing Leo XIV’s lifelong custodianship of Augustinian values such as humility, community, and love of truth. Together, these chapters situate Leo XIV within the Augustinian patrimony of identity and spirituality, suggesting that his papacy will be defined not primarily by institutional politics but by a deep-rooted charism.

The second section turns to Leo XIV’s understanding of the papacy and the Church. Ossai’s chapter, “With You I Am a Christian, For You I Am a Bishop,” situates the Pope’s episcopal identity within Augustine’s theology of episcopacy as service. In a very unique way, Pilani’s on discipleship emphasizes Leo XIV’s view that discipleship is dynamic, communal, and grounded in Augustine’s anthropology. Ovie’s study of mission frames Leo XIV as a teacher with personal experience of missionary trials, particularly in Latin America, and examines his call for a Church that is both missionary and dialogical. Kanu’s contextual essay on evangelization in Africa interprets Leo XIV’s theology of

⁵¹ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, OSA and Emeka Xris Obiezu, OSA, Introduction - *Habemus Papam*, in Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine, x.

⁵² Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, OSA, “Pope Leo XIV: Early Life, Education, and Vocation,” in *Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine*, 2–14.



evangelization as “the infinite grace that radiates from lives transformed,”⁵³ showing how this resonates with Africa’s pressing need for renewal and justice. This section portrays Leo XIV as a Pope who sees himself not as a distant monarch but as a fellow disciple and servant, committed to a synodal and missionary Church.

The third and last section of the book focuses on Leo XIV’s global outlook, especially his commitment to peace and justice. Obiezu’s chapter introduces the concept of “*disarmed peace and disarming peace*”, drawing on Augustine’s notion of peace as rightly ordered relationships. He argues that Leo XIV advocates for a peace rooted in justice and humility, one that dismantles structures of violence. The next chapter, written by Hassan, expands this by linking the Pope’s vision to dialogue and human dignity, emphasizing that peace is not optional but imperative. Pilani’s concluding reflection frames Leo XIV’s message, “*Peace be with you,*” as a prophetic articulation of the Church’s vocation as reconciler in a conflict-ridden world. The chapters of the last section collectively underline the fact that peace is the central motif of Leo XIV’s engagement with the world, echoing both Augustine’s *City of God* and Leo XIII’s social encyclicals.

It is pertinent to observe that the timing of the publication of this book, within a few months of Leo XIV’s election, is crucial. It represents one of the earliest scholarly attempts to frame the new papacy, setting the tone for future theological and philosophical engagements. By rooting Leo XIV’s papacy in the African heritage of Augustine, the authors also seek to reclaim Augustine as not merely a Latin or European figure but as an African intellectual and spiritual father whose legacy resonates across continents. In this sense, the book participates in a broader project of African theological retrieval, positioning Nigeria and the wider African Church as central contributors to global Catholic scholarship.

Strengths Of The Work

Perhaps the greatest strength of *Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine* lies in its consistent effort to **interpret papal leadership through Augustinian categories**. Augustine’s reflections on episcopacy, *with you I am a Christian, for you I am a bishop, on the restless human heart (Confessions I.1)*, and on *peace as rightly ordered love (City of God XIX.13)* are woven into analyses of Leo XIV’s identity, ecclesiology, and global mission. This synthesis provides not only a theological foundation for understanding the Pope’s ministry but also a philosophical lens through which to interpret his responses to contemporary challenges such as globalization, migration, and technological transformation. In this sense, the book successfully demonstrates that the **Augustinian patrimony remains a living resource**, capable of informing the highest office of the Church. It places Leo XIV in continuity with both **Augustine of Hippo** and **Leo XIII**, whose *Rerum Novarum* shaped Catholic social thought in the industrial age.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, OSA, “Evangelization as the Infinite Grace that Radiates from Lives Transformed”: Implications of Pope Leo XIV’s Theology of Evangelization for Africa” in *Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine*, 134 -149.

⁵⁴ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, OSA, “Pope Leo XIV: Intersection of Pontifical Name and Vision,” in *Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine*, 15–27; see also Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (Rome: Vatican Press, 1891).



Another strength of the book is the **African contextual grounding** of the work. Augustine, though often remembered as a Latin Father, was a North African bishop. By reclaiming Augustine's African-ness, the authors situate Leo XIV's papacy within a wider African narrative. Kanu, for instance, emphasizes the implications of Leo XIV's theology of evangelization for contemporary Africa, highlighting themes of transformation, justice, and inclusivity.⁵⁵ This perspective is particularly important because it resists Eurocentric appropriations of Augustine and asserts that the African Church has a privileged hermeneutical position in interpreting both Augustine and the Augustinian papacy. It also testifies to the maturity of **African theological scholarship**, which is increasingly confident in contributing to global debates on faith, mission, and justice.

It is pertinent to note that the book benefits from the diverse expertise of its contributors. Some approach the Pope's identity through biography and spirituality (Kanu, Ugonwafor), others through ecclesiology (Ossai, Pilani), and others still through social ethics and conflict resolution (Hassan, Obiezu). This plurality of voices enriches the analysis while embodying Augustine's own commitment to community and dialogue. Such **multidisciplinary engagement** allows the book to address not only theological questions but also practical concerns such as peacebuilding, missionary activity, and human dignity. Obiezu's essay on "disarmed peace" is particularly striking in this regard, offering a nuanced model of peace rooted in both Augustine and contemporary nonviolence theory.⁵⁶

Although scholarly, the book is written in a style that remains **accessible to a broad readership**. The editors stress that the contributors sought "high scholarly quality yet [to communicate] in a manner easily readable by a wide audience."⁵⁷ This makes the book suitable not only for theologians and philosophers but also for clergy, seminarians, and lay readers interested in the papacy. The clear structure, three parts corresponding to identity, ecclesiology, and global vision, also enhances accessibility. Readers can trace a logical progression from personal spirituality to ecclesial leadership to global mission.

More so, the book is significant because it represents one of the **earliest scholarly reflections** on Leo XIV's papacy, published within few months of his election. By framing his pontificate within Augustinian categories from the outset, the authors have provided a **hermeneutical key** that will likely influence subsequent scholarship. In this way, the book functions not only as a tribute but also as a **foundational text** for future studies on the Augustinian papacy.

Weaknesses and Limitations

A central limitation of the book is its **tone of celebration**, which often borders on hagiography. While it is natural that Augustinian friars writing about the first Augustinian pope would adopt a tone of pride and joy, this sometimes diminishes the book's critical

⁵⁵ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, OSA, "Evangelization as the Infinite Grace that Radiates from Lives Transformed: Implications of Pope Leo XIV's Theology of Evangelization for Africa," in *Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine*, 134–49.

⁵⁶ Emeka Xris Obiezu, OSA, "Disarmed Peace and Disarming Peace: An Augustinian Insight to Pope Leo XIV's Paradigm for Global Peace," in *Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine*, 151–66.

⁵⁷ Kanu and Obiezu, Introduction - *Habemus Papam*, xiii



edge. For instance, while contributors eloquently describe Leo XIV's humility, missionary experience, and Augustinian identity, they rarely question how these ideals might clash with the realities of Vatican politics, internal Church divisions, or the weight of global expectations. The lack of a **critical distance** means that the book risks being received more as a *festschrift* or commemorative volume than as a rigorous theological or philosophical study. This celebratory stance may limit its appeal for non-Augustinian scholars who seek a more detached evaluation of the Pope's early pontificate.

While Augustine was not only a theologian but also a philosopher of enduring influence, the book **underutilized Augustine's philosophical legacy**. References to Augustine's metaphysics of time, epistemology, or theory of knowledge are sparse. Instead, the emphasis falls primarily on his pastoral theology and spirituality. For example, Augustine's reflections on the relationship between faith and reason, or his profound insights on memory and interiority (*Confessions* X), could have enriched the discussion of Leo XIV's intellectual background and his engagement with modernity, particularly in an age shaped by artificial intelligence and digital culture. By neglecting these philosophical dimensions, the book narrows Augustine's relevance to the papacy, focusing almost exclusively on spirituality and ecclesiology.

Although the book effectively incorporates an African perspective, its engagement with **global contexts** remains limited. Pope Leo XIV, as a dual citizen of Peru and the United States, embodies a multicultural and transnational identity. Yet the contributors, predominantly Nigerian Augustinians, do not substantially explore how his papacy might resonate with or challenge theological developments in Latin America, North America, or Europe. Moreover, while the book addresses pressing issues such as migration, inequality, and peace, it does not delve deeply into **interreligious dialogue, secularism, or ecological crises** beyond brief mentions. Given that Leo XIV himself has expressed concern for integral ecology and the dignity of creation, a stronger engagement with Augustine's reflections on creation and order could have offered valuable insights.

Another shortcoming is the near silence on **doctrinal and pastoral controversies** currently facing the Church. The contributors affirm Leo XIV's Augustinian humility and vision of discipleship but do not ask how he might address difficult questions such as the ordination of women, the pastoral care of LGBTQ+ Catholics, or the Church's handling of clerical abuse. These silences weaken the book's claim to be a "systematic scholarly exploration" of the Pope's papacy. To be fair, the book was published very early in his pontificate, and it may have been premature to speculate on controversial policies. Nonetheless, acknowledging these debates would have made the analysis more robust and realistic.

Furthermore, the book does not substantially dialogue with the **broader field of papal studies**. While Leo XIII is frequently mentioned, there is little comparative analysis with the papacies of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, or Francis. Such comparisons could have clarified the distinctive contribution of an Augustinian Pope in contrast to his Dominican, Jesuit, or secularly formed predecessors. The absence of this comparative framework



means that the book remains somewhat insular, rich in Augustinian insight but less engaged with the broader scholarly discourse on papal identity and leadership.

Philosophical And Theological Contributions

Despite its limitations, the book: *Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine* makes several noteworthy contributions to contemporary thought. These can be grouped under four interrelated domains: **philosophy of religion, ecclesiology, political theology, and African Theological Contribution.**

1. Contribution to Philosophy of Religion

The book situates Pope Leo XIV's identity firmly within Augustine's philosophy of the human person, especially the theme of **interiority**. Augustine's famous line, "*You were within me, but I was outside myself*" (*Confessions* X.27), underscores the human search for truth within the depths of the soul. By emphasizing Leo XIV's Augustinian patrimony, the contributors implicitly argue that the Pope embodies a spirituality of **self-knowledge leading to God-knowledge.**

This Augustinian anthropology, which highlights the **restlessness of the human heart** until it rests in God (*Confessions* I.1), provides a philosophical underpinning for Leo XIV's pastoral approach. His insistence that the Church be close to those who suffer, migrants, and workers reflects a metaphysical conviction that all human longing finds fulfillment only in God. Thus, the Pope's pastoral concern is not merely social but ontological, grounded in Augustine's vision of the human person as a seeker of transcendence.

Furthermore, Augustine's epistemological principle, *crede ut intelligas* ("believe so that you may understand"), illuminates Leo XIV's measured approach to modern challenges, including artificial intelligence and digital culture. While the book does not explore this deeply, it hints that Leo XIV's Augustinian heritage provides resources for engaging the epistemological crisis of truth in a postmodern age.

2. Contribution to Ecclesiology

The second major contribution is ecclesiological. The book consistently emphasizes Leo XIV's self-understanding in Augustinian terms: "*With you I am a Christian, for you I am a bishop.*" This statement relativizes hierarchical distance, presenting the Pope not as a monarch above the faithful but as a **fellow disciple among disciples**, entrusted with the ministry of unity. In this, the book contributes to the ongoing theological discourse on **synodality**, a theme central to Pope Francis and increasingly to Leo XIV. Augustine's conception of the Church as a **pilgrim people journeying towards the heavenly city** (*City of God* XIX) informs the contributors' claim that Leo XIV's papacy will be marked by humility, shared discipleship, and listening. Moreover, the Augustinian ideal of *unitas*, "one mind and one heart in God" (Acts 4:32, often cited in Augustinian writings), emerges as a guiding principle for Leo XIV's ecclesiology. This provides a theological basis for a Church that seeks reconciliation amid polarization, whether doctrinal, cultural, or political.



3. Contribution to Political Theology

Interestingly, the book makes a valuable contribution to **political theology**, particularly in its treatment of peace, justice, and social doctrine. Obiezu's notion of "*disarmed peace and disarming peace*" reflects Augustine's nuanced understanding of peace as more than the absence of war; it is the tranquility of order, rooted in justice and rightly ordered love (*City of God* XIX.13). By linking Leo XIV's vision to Augustine and Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, the contributors suggest that the Augustinian Pope stands within a tradition of **Catholic social teaching that prioritizes the dignity of labour, the rights of the poor, and the pursuit of peace**. Hassan and Pilani extend this argument by showing how Leo XIV's inaugural words, "*Peace be with you all*", resonate with global calls for reconciliation in conflict-ridden societies. Here, the book advances an **Augustinian political theology for the twenty-first century**, one that is attentive to structural injustices (migration, inequality, ecological crisis) while grounded in humility and spiritual conversion.

4. The African Theological Contribution

A final contribution worth noting is the book's role in advancing **African theological scholarship**. By foregrounding Augustine's African-ness and articulating the implications of Leo XIV's vision for Africa, the authors assert Africa's rightful place in the global theological conversation. Kanu's chapter on evangelization in Africa, in particular, reclaims Augustine not as a distant Latin Father but as a **North African bishop whose insights remain relevant for the continent's struggles with poverty, injustice, and religious pluralism**. This Afro-Augustinian hermeneutic is not only historically corrective but also theologically creative, offering new pathways for dialogue between tradition and context.

Conclusion

Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine is both a **commemorative tribute** and a **scholarly intervention** in the early months of Pope Leo XIV's pontificate. The book succeeds in situating the papacy of the first Augustinian Pope within the **spiritual and intellectual patrimony of Saint Augustine of Hippo**. By structuring the work around identity, ecclesiology, and global vision, the contributors illuminate the Augustinian character of Leo XIV's ministry: a papacy defined by humility, discipleship, community, and a deep commitment to peace and justice.

The book's **strengths** are manifold: it integrates Augustine's theology into contemporary papal discourse, foregrounds Africa's role in global Catholicism, benefits from multidisciplinary contributions, and remains accessible to both scholarly and pastoral audiences. Importantly, it provides an **early hermeneutical framework** for interpreting Leo XIV's papacy, highlighting his Augustinian roots as a key to understanding his approach to evangelization, ecclesial leadership, and social justice.

At the same time, the work is marked by **limitations**. Its celebratory tone often overshadows critical analysis, leaving insufficient space for questions about how Augustinian ideals will intersect with Vatican realities. Its philosophical engagement is limited, with little attention to Augustine's metaphysics or epistemology, and its



contextual scope remains primarily Nigerian, with minimal dialogue with Latin American or European theological traditions. Furthermore, its silence on controversial issues within the Church, such as gender, sexuality, and abuse, limits its capacity to offer a truly comprehensive assessment of Leo XIV's challenges.

Nevertheless, the book makes **significant contributions** to philosophy of religion, ecclesiology, political theology. It retrieves Augustine's anthropology of restlessness, his vision of the Church as a pilgrim people, and his political theology of peace, applying them to the contemporary papacy. It also advances **African Augustinian scholarship**, reclaiming Augustine as an African thinker whose legacy continues to shape global Catholicism.

As a whole, *the book* should be read as a **foundational text**: not the final word on the Augustinian papacy, but a vital first step in framing Leo XIV's pontificate within Augustine's intellectual and spiritual legacy. Its true value may lie less in the completeness of its analysis than in its capacity to **provoke further inquiry**, into how an Augustinian Pope will negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity, unity and diversity, truth and mercy, doctrine and pastoral care.

In this sense, the book embodies Augustine's own insight that every Christian journey is marked by **restlessness until it finds rest in God**. Pope Leo XIV, as presented by his Augustinian friars, is entrusted with guiding the Church on that restless journey towards unity, peace, and truth. This book, despite its hagiographic tones, provides an invaluable resource for scholars, clergy, and laity seeking to understand both the Pope and the enduring relevance of Saint Augustine.

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