

On the election of Pope Leo XIV

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In the vast sea of information, we turn our focused attention to the first phase of the new Papacy, guided by insights from an interview with Massimo Leone and Massimo Rospocher, Directors of the FBK Center for Religious Studies and Italian-German Historical Institute, respectively

Pope Leo XIV explained his choice of name as a tribute to Pope Leo XIII, who, through the historic encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, addressed the social question during the first great industrial revolution. He emphasized that “today the Church offers its rich tradition of social teaching to confront the challenges of a new industrial revolution—shaped by developments in artificial intelligence—which pose fresh questions about the defense of human dignity, justice, and the future of work.” **Is the interaction between the human and AI an issue that your Research Centers are also concerned with?**

Massimo Leone: “Fondazione Bruno Kessler’s [Center for Religious Studies](#) is also dedicating its **annual seminar for 2025 to the dialectic between transformation and preservation in religion and ethics**. This choice reflects an awareness of a **profound complementarity** between the Foundation’s activities at Povo and those of our Center at Santa Croce St. We do not merely represent conservation while valuing the social, cultural and religious principles inscribed in our history. On the contrary, we serve as a space for reflection and critical inquiry into what should be preserved in an era of rapid **technological acceleration**—an era in which not only technologies, but society as a whole, are undergoing profound transformation. This reflection is ultimately about the human. If the Foundation’s guiding principle is *to develop human-centered AI*, we must first ask: what are the essential qualities of our **humanity**, and how can they be preserved amid an industrial landscape increasingly shaped by autonomous computational technologies. At the heart of this inquiry lies a deeper question of meaning: What does it truly mean to entrust so many of our activities—and decisions—to increasingly autonomous systems? As we navigate this transition, how can we ensure that our human, social, cultural, and religious values are safeguarded?”



Massimo Rospoche: “The choice of a name is never arbitrary—least of all for a pope. It is his first official act as pontiff, a decision steeped in history, symbolism, and intent. In selecting the name Leo XIV, the new pope signaled not only a commitment to **social justice** but also a desire to underscore the Catholic Church’s engagement with **historical change**. Since its founding in 1973, the Italian-German Historical Institute ([FBK-ISIG](#)) has made the study of historical transitions and transformations a central focus of its research. Over the years, ISIG has explored topics ranging from the dawn of modernity and media revolutions to pivotal transitional periods. Today, the pressing challenge is to understand the far-reaching consequences of technological change—its economic, social, cultural, and scientific dimensions. In this rapidly evolving landscape, it is essential for institutes like ours to critically reflect on both the **risks** and **opportunities** that **generative AI** presents for research and teaching in the humanities. This is not a challenge we can afford to ignore, but one we must confront openly and thoughtfully.”

Let’s take a step back, to the time of the Conclave. What were the interactions between this ancient ritual and the way modern communication influences the perception and interpretation of such a traditional event?

Massimo Leone: “I would answer by highlighting **two seemingly opposing**, but actually **complementary** dynamics. On the one hand, the process of preparation for the Conclave has seemed permeable to the global system of circulation of meaning, which is increasingly rapid and fragmented. **Social networks** blur the line between public and private life, exposing microsecrets and generating a continuous stream of event-driven content aimed at capturing and holding attention. With this in mind, the lead-up to the Conclave appeared as become steeped in **global digital chatter**, filled with speculation about the next pope and media coverage that often veered into kitsch—mirroring the fleeting and superficial nature typical of social media discourse. On the other hand, however, this same pervasiveness paradoxically accentuated the **power of the sacred** and its **impermeability**. At the utterance of the phrase *extra omnes*, the Conclave has closed itself in its shrine of silence, mystery and secrecy. Even the constant buzz of social media found itself forced to wait. No live broadcast, no tweet could violate the mystery of the sacred. In this tension between **digital omnipresence and spiritual silence**, the Conclave revealed its

dual nature: open to the fragmentary narratives of the contemporary world, but at the same time deeply resistant to their superficiality.”

Massimo Rospocher: “The conclave, yesterday as today, serves as a powerful catalyst of public opinion. Throughout the centuries, the sede vacante period preceding a papal election has consistently given rise to a surge of *rumors*, falsehoods, and all manner of gossip. One need only think of the practice of anonymously posting desecrating sonnets, songs and satires on the **statue of Pasquino in Rome**. A practice that is still in use today and is not too dissimilar from contemporary social media posts, which really do nothing more than reinvent very long-lasting modes of communication. The custom of **betting** on the papal election is also rooted in history: it represented a pastime that crossed all social strata in sixteenth-century Rome, so much so that the Church was forced to intervene to curb a phenomenon that could sometimes even influence the outcomes of the Conclave. This is not to say that nothing changes throughout history, just think of the global communicative dimension achieved by this ritual. et, despite the dominant rhetoric celebrating the advent of a ‘**digital piazza**,’ it is striking how Romans and the faithful continue to gather in the physical space of St. Peter’s Square at the announcement of the white smoke—testifying to the enduring power of traditional collective rituals.”

Regarding the challenges of this historical moment, a clear call for peace was made from the very beginning, culminating in a heartfelt appeal to the ‘great ones of the Earth.’ What were the examples of Popes who succeeded in influencing the international political agenda? And what are the chances of succeeding in the present?



Massimo Leone: “All pontiffs possess in authority, and often in action, an extraordinary ability to **influence** the destinies of humanity and the planet. This influence derives not only from their role as spiritual leaders for a large portion of humanity, but also from their unique position: immersed in the world, but projected beyond it, thanks to a **transcendent dimension**. Pope Francis, for example, has had a profound impact on numerous aspects of contemporary life. His voice has been raised on behalf of the poor, the environment and social justice, leaving an imprint that has

transcended the boundaries of the Church. But the echo of his influence resonated powerfully even after his death: the **funeral of Pope Francis** was an occasion for the great of the Earth to come together, and in that funeral event a political miracle almost manifested itself. International tensions seemed to be easing, and the pontiff's spiritual momentum continued to act even after his passing. His successor, **Pope Leo XIV**, is in a similarly favorable position. His biography, spiritual depth, and international presence position him as a figure capable of wielding influence equal to—or even surpassing—that of his predecessor. However, his approach and vision reflect peculiar sensitivities, which could translate into new modes of intervention. Looking back, the model of **Pope John Paul II** remains perhaps the most emblematic. His role in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War showed how a pontiff can act not only as a **spiritual leader** but also as a leading **historical actor**. In this context, a pope's ability to influence the global political agenda depends not only on the force of his words, but on his ability to transform them into concrete, symbolic and diplomatic gestures capable of resonating far beyond the walls of the Vatican."

Massimo Rospoche: Examples throughout history would be countless, but it is at least appropriate to distinguish two types of influence on the international political agenda. With regard to the modern age, the **founder of ISIG, Paolo Prodi**, coined the phrase '**sovereign pontiff**' to identify the dual role—both temporal and spiritual—that characterized the popes of that era. In addition to being a universal religious leader, the pope was also a head of state, and as such, promoted wars and formed alliances with other European rulers. In this context, pontiffs such as **Julius II** (1503–1513), the 'warrior pope', redrew the geopolitical map of the continent, pursued an unscrupulous foreign policy, and demonstrated a penchant for war that makes them inconceivable if we think of the role of the papacy in the 21st century. In contemporary times, the temporal function of the Roman pontiff has obviously diminished, but it is evident that some popes have played a decisive role at key turning points of the twentieth century. One need only think of **Pope John Paul II's** active role in the fall of the Berlin Wall, or even the hesitations of Pope **Pius XII** in dealing with fascist regimes. Today, the Catholic Church therefore continues to play an important role on the global political stage, and Pope Francis's appeals on issues such as the environment, social justice, and migrants have strongly resonated in international public debate. It is difficult to measure their effects at present, and even more complicated to predict what chances of success Leo XIV will have on these same issues."

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