

ESSAY

THE CONSTITUTIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FIRST AMERICAN POPE AND THE PROMISE OF LISTENING IN AN ERA OF MUTUAL SUSPICION

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ABSTRACT

Pope Leo XIV has focused a good deal of writing and speaking in the first year of his pontificate on the theme of listening, dialogue, and bridge-building. For Leo, listening, dialogue, and creating harmony across diverse perspectives where possible are at the heart of the Christian life. But his reflections on these themes, while rooted in theology, are aimed at a wider audience, going well beyond the church community, and addressing philosophical issues of universal human concern. Indeed, the first American pope happens to be highlighting certain ideals regarding dialogue that, while perhaps forgotten today, are central to the American Constitution as well.

In this article, I will show first how the surprising election of the first American pope was itself made possible by a two hundred fifty-year dialogue between American constitutional actors and Catholic social thought. Over the course of that time, both made a long journey from sharp, polarized antagonism and mutual suspicion to mutual respect by listening to each other and even learning from each other. Second, I will explore Pope Leo's theology and philosophy of dialogue. For Leo, dialogue is a "way of life" that has deep roots in Scripture and the writings of Saint Augustine. Through his explorations of these sources, he has developed a theologically, morally, and psychologically rich account of dialogue as one in which the truth about the world is discovered and both parties to a dialogue are transformed via a process of listening, critical thinking, and charitable engagement with one's interlocutors. Third, I will attempt to show how the history of the 250-year dialogue between America and the Catholic Church, and Pope Leo's theology and philosophy of dialogue, may have significance for the American Constitution today. In our current fraught moment, the inability to speak productively with each other appears to be warping our constitutional system and undermining confidence in the Constitution itself,

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fueling flirtation with “post-liberalism” on both the left and right. Just as Pope Leo’s episcopal motto, “In illo Uno unum,” happens to rhyme with America’s traditional motto, “e pluribus unum,” his theological and philosophical reflections on dialogue echo some often overlooked yet crucial insights from America’s founding generation, and later jurists, about the necessity of healthy and robust dialogue for the American Constitution to endure.

INTRODUCTION

On July 3, 2026, Pope Leo XIV received the Liberty Medal from the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. Leo spoke to those in attendance at the museum in Philadelphia via a live feed from the Vatican. The timing and physical symbolism of the moment were poignant. Speaking just one day before the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Leo addressed his listeners live from the bright yellow and gold papal study on the third floor of the Apostolic Palace, with religious artwork and windows that faced out onto St. Peter’s Square. Standing to give his address, he wore his traditional papal outfit, with white cassock, pellegrina, fascia with gold fringe, and skull cap, along with a large cross hanging lower on his chest. But in addition to that familiar papal attire, he wore around his neck a prominent red, white, and blue ribbon that held the golden Liberty Medal, which bore on its face the prominent image of the Liberty Bell. And his talk was projected live onto a screen mounted on a 100-foot-wide wall in the hall of the National Constitution Center and surrounded by a 50-ton marble engraving of the First Amendment, looking directly out towards Independence Hall.

The first American Pope in Catholic Church history was speaking live from the heart of the Vatican to his listeners in Philadelphia, who watched him on a screen surrounded by the forty-five words of America’s First Amendment. He thanked them for the award, addressed them as “friends,” and urged them to be “united” in their ongoing devotion to the “resounding” and “noble” ideals of the American founding captured in the Declaration of Independence.¹ And he added that he hoped that this American “tradition” of advancing liberty, equality, and human dignity would continue to bear fruit “through a public discourse marked by moderation, respect for the views of others, and an ongoing effort to find common ground.”²

The historic improbability of this moment should not be underestimated. For starters, Pope Leo was, as he put it, a “son of this great country.” The election of the first ever Pope from the United States just over a year ago on May 8, 2025, had shocked the world. With the historic election of Robert Francis Prevost of Chicago, Illinois (and by way of college, Philadelphia) as Pope Leo XIV, the Roman Catholic Church took one giant leap to choose, for

1. Pope Leo XIV, Address upon Accepting the Liberty Medal of the National Constitution Center (July 3, 2026).

2. *Id.*

the first time in its history, a pontiff from the United States. After more than 2,000 years and 266 previous popes, the current “man in white” grew up speaking English with a midwestern American accent, watching White Sox baseball, and eating deep dish pizza. He hails from a country forged by a unique amalgam of Enlightenment liberal ideals, Protestant religious values, and English constitutional traditions that have emphasized individual rights and pluralism—and which have at times sat uneasily with the Roman Catholic Church. And he now shepherds a church which just over a century ago viewed America as an outpost “mission territory,” and which his own predecessor, Leo XIII, described in 1899 as the birthplace of its own peculiar heresy which he termed “Americanism.”

He has also become Pope at a moment of great division and mutual suspicion for his home country, the Catholic Church, and indeed the world. In America, there is a palpable sense that the civic bonds that have held Americans together in the past are fraying. More Americans today describe public life as having become more uncivil, sharply polarized, and divided than at any time in recent memory.³ There is a growing anxiety that Americans can no longer listen to each other, reason with each other, or work together across their differences. Fewer Americans report friendships with people of the opposing political party.⁴ Many Americans report having lost the affection of friends and family

3. According to a 2023 American Bar Association survey, eighty-five percent of American adults said that they thought civility in America was worse today than it was just ten years ago. *ABA Survey: Civility is vanishing—and it's the media's fault*, ABA (Apr. 27, 2023) <https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/aba-news-archives/2023/04/aba-survey-civic-literacy> [<https://perma.cc/N7R8-S5UL>]. A 2024 Gallup poll reported that eighty percent of American adults believed that Americans are greatly divided over the most important values, the highest such percentage in the history of that survey. *Americans Agree Nation Is Divided on Key Values*, GALLUP (Sept. 23, 2024) <https://news.gallup.com/poll/650828/americans-agree-nation-divided-key-values.aspx> [<https://perma.cc/X3R5-8VSY>]. Indeed a 2021 poll conducted by the UVA Center for Politics found that about eighty percent of Americans thought the elected officials from the opposing party presented a “clear and present danger” to American democracy. Tim Robinson, *Center for Politics Partnership Probes the Deep Divides in American Politics and Society*, UVATODAY (Sept. 30, 2021) <https://news.virginia.edu/content/center-politics-partnership-probes-deep-divides-american-politics-and-society> [<https://perma.cc/9QW3-V8MC>]. And a 2025 New York Times poll indicates that things have deteriorated in just the past five years, with sixty-four percent of Americans reporting that the country is too divided to solve its problems. Jeremy W. Peters and Ruth Igielnik, *Most Voters Think America's Divisions Cannot Be Overcome, Poll Says*, NEW YORK TIMES (Oct. 2, 2025) <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/02/us/politics/times-siena-poll-political-polarization.html> [<https://perma.cc/Z5YX-5W8U>]. In that survey, registered voters ranked polarization a more serious, important problem facing the country than inflation, crime, health care, and foreign policy.

4. See generally, Angela J. Bahns, *Examining the Frequency and Characteristics of Politically Diverse Friendships*, 17 SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PERSONALITY SCIENCE 290-301 (2025) (finding that today “Friendships between Democrats and Republicans were rare and the degree of political attitude dissimilarity within pairs was generally low.”)

members due to political disagreements over the past decade.⁵ Compounding this problem, many have even lost faith in their ability to talk with each other and agree on facts.⁶ One thing they agree upon, however, is that Americans can just not agree. Over eighty percent of Americans, for example, agree that Republicans and Democrats cannot even agree on basic facts.⁷ The divisions seem to run so deep, Americans seem to live increasingly in alternative epistemic bubbles, with individually tailored algorithms sorting out what kinds of news, real or fake, to dispense to their different users on social media.⁸ And though seemingly more connected than ever via social media and their devices, more Americans report fewer meaningful social connections and greater rates of loneliness and social isolation.⁹ And as Americans draw further into their private worlds, they are simultaneously reporting lower levels of trust in each other and sharply declining levels of trust in their governing institutions.¹⁰

Amidst all of this division and mutual suspicion, Pope Leo has focused a good deal of writing and speaking in the first year of his pontificate on the theme of listening, dialogue, and bridge-building. Indeed, he has placed particular emphasis upon the *way* we talk with each other and the *manner* in which we attempt to solve problems. To speak grammatically, he is focusing at least as much on adverbs—on how people communicate with each other, how we talk about each other, and how words are used, information is disseminated, and decisions are made—as he is on nouns and verbs, or the outcomes of any particular decisions. Specifically, he has argued for the importance of epistemic humility, listening to others, thinking critically, and speaking to each other in a courteous and respectful manner. And he is rooting this theology of dialogue, naturally perhaps as the Vicar of Christ, in the Gospel and the writings of Saint Augustine. He has, after all, chosen for his papal motto a decidedly theological

5. See, e.g., Mertcan Gungor & Peter H. Ditto, *Political Breakups: Interpersonal Consequences of Polarization*, 5 PNAS NEXUS 67 (2026) (finding that thirty-seven percent of Americans report having had a “political breakup.”)

6. Elisa Shearer, *Most Americans say Republicans and Democratic Voters Cannot Agree on Basic Facts*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (July 30, 2025), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/07/30/most-americans-say-republican-and-democratic-voters-cannot-agree-on-basic-facts> [https://perma.cc/5AE5-G3RR].

7. *Id.*

8. See, e.g., Sandra González-Bailón et al., *Asymmetric Ideological Segregation in Exposure to Political News on Facebook*, 381 SCIENCE 392-398 (2023).

9. See generally, Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (2023).

10. See, e.g., Laura Silver, et. al., *Americans' Trust in One Another*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER, (May 8, 2025) <https://www.pewresearch.org/2025/05/08/americans-trust-in-one-another> [https://perma.cc/V54A-WDN9] (reporting that the share of adults who said “most people can be trusted” declined from forty-six percent in 1972 to thirty-four percent in 2023–2024); Lydia Saad, *Confidence in U.S. Institutions Remains Near All-Time Low*, GALLUP (July 13, 2026) <https://news.gallup.com/poll/712436/confidence-institutions-remains-near-time-low.aspx> [https://perma.cc/JFR2-LX7U].

maxim, “In Illo uno unum,” or “In the One we are one.” For Leo, listening, dialogue, and creating harmony across diverse perspectives where possible are at the heart of the Christian life.

Dialogue is also, as it happens, central to the American Constitution. It was originally forged out of fiery dialogue, first at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention and then in an intense, highly fraught, occasionally violent nationwide contest for ratification across the states. It has endured throughout the centuries amidst never-ending controversy principally through conversation and argument, much of which echoes the debates and arguments from those founding contests. It sets up and structures conversation within institutions, between institutions, and across time. For example, it shapes and organizes the conversations that happen within institutions like Congress or the Supreme Court, and between institutions, such as the federal government and the states, or the federal courts and the political institutions. And constitutional governance relies most fundamentally upon the ability of “We the People” to speak with each other, reason, deliberate, argue, and compromise their way to a relatively peaceful and harmonious “unum” out of an inevitably diverse and fractious “pluribus.”

The constitutional significance of the first American pope, therefore, may lie not in any doctrinal issue regarding the Establishment Clause, or even a direct collision between the Vatican and the White House over an issue of policy, as happened between Pope Leo and President Trump over the war in Iran in April 2026,¹¹ but instead in Leo’s deeper meditations on dialogue. In particular, his papacy may help reveal the possibility, requirements, and urgency of listening and dialogue at a moment when the absence of healthy dialogue is not only making American politics more uncivil, but is also warping and even undermining confidence in America’s constitutional system. If the Constitution depends upon a civic culture of listening, dialogue, and critical inquiry, then Leo’s reflections on these themes, albeit in the context of the “City of God,” may be a helpful haven for a fraught moment for the “City of Man” too.

Pope Leo’s reflections on these themes, while rooted in theology, are aimed at a wider audience, going well beyond the church community, and addressing philosophical issues of universal human concern. Indeed, the first American pope happens (perhaps in spite of himself) to be highlighting certain ideals regarding dialogue that are quintessentially *American*. They are at the distinctive heart of the American constitutional project, but have been perhaps overlooked or even forgotten by many Americans. It is therefore no surprise that his episcopal motto, “In Illo uno unum” is a close, rhyming theological parallel with America’s own traditional yet secular motto, “e pluribus unum.” In this respect, the constitutional significance of the first American pope may be to help reacquaint his fellow Americans, believers and unbelievers alike, with certain forgotten ideals upon which the Constitution itself depends.

11. See, e.g., Elisabeth Dias, *How Trump’s Clash with Pope Leo Turned Into a Fight Over Theology*, N.Y. TIMES (Apr. 15, 2026).

This essay will explore this thesis in three parts, for at the heart of the improbable story of the election of the first pope from the United States are three overlooked yet interrelated stories about dialogue. The first is historical, the second theological and philosophical, and the third constitutional. Each reveals how Pope Leo's papacy may help shed some light on the possibility, requirements, and necessity of dialogue today.

In the first part, I will chart the 250-year dialogue between American constitutional actors and Catholic social thought. Over the course of more than two centuries, America and the Vatican made a long journey from sharp, polarized antagonism and mutual suspicion to mutual respect by listening to each other and even learning from each other. The election of the first American pope may therefore be the fruit of that dialogue, and help reveal the possibility of genuine dialogue across mutual suspicion.

In the second part, I will explore Pope Leo's theology and philosophy of dialogue. His election may be the fruit of historical dialogue, but he has emerged as one of the world's leading theologians and philosophers of dialogue as well. For Leo, dialogue is a "way of life" that has deep roots in Scripture and the writings of Saint Augustine. Through his explorations of these sources, he has developed a theologically, morally, and psychologically rich account of dialogue as one in which the truth about the world is discovered and both parties to a dialogue are transformed. Genuine dialogue, he has said, begins with an openness to listening, is sifted through critical thinking, and then culminates in the careful, charitable use of words. And it aims, ultimately, not at demolition or even eradication of the "other side," but harmonization of the inevitably conflicting and diverse voices in society. These are, for Leo, the epistemic, scientific, and moral requirements needed for healthy dialogue today.

In the third and final part, I will attempt to show how the history of the 250-year dialogue between America and the Catholic Church, along with Pope Leo's theology and philosophy of dialogue, may have significance for the American Constitution today. The Constitution is not just a lawyer's document, but also a technology by which an inevitably diverse and wrangling people with conflicting worldviews and clashing interests can nonetheless live and work together in peace and prosperity. And throughout its history, some of its greatest jurists have explained how its ringing defense of individual liberty depends upon an institutional structure, which in turn depends upon a spirit of dialogue, reason-giving, epistemic modesty, and compromise. In our current fraught moment, the inability to speak productively with each other appears to be warping our constitutional system and undermining confidence in the Constitution itself. Therefore, I will argue that just as Pope Leo's episcopal motto happens to rhyme with America's traditional motto, his theological and philosophical reflections on dialogue echo some often overlooked yet crucial insights from America's founding generation, and later jurists, about the necessity of healthy and robust dialogue for the American Constitution to endure.

I. THE STORY OF A 250 YEAR DIALOGUE BETWEEN AMERICA AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

A. *The Late Eighteenth Century Creation of the American Constitution in the Shadow of the Papacy*

In 1787 and 1788, when the U.S. Constitution was being shaped and debated throughout the states, it was a regular feature of the nationwide conversation to refer to the papacy in Rome as an object lesson, usually, in what to avoid. It may not be too much of a stretch to suggest that the Constitution was formed, at least in small part, in the shadow of the papacy. Whenever they happened to discuss the papacy, the delegates to the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention that had met in Independence Hall (towards which Pope Leo faced during his address at the National Constitution Center in 2026), and the numerous participants on both sides of the ratification debates from 1787 to 1788, did so in nearly every case to exemplify the kinds of institutional arrangements and values *antithetical* to the new republic they hoped to establish.

The papacy was anti-republican where no other system but a republic “would be reconcilable with the genius of the people of America.”¹² The Anti-Federalist Dewitt Clinton offhandedly made this point as “A Countryman” in the *New York Journal* when he observed that Tories who lived in Pennsylvania and longed for the restoration of the monarchy nonetheless called themselves “republicans,” adding that they did so because “they knew it was a name that is very pleasing to the people, when, in truth, they are no more republicans than the pope.”¹³

The papacy was a financially bloated institution whose worldly grandeur and possessions far exceeded the modest provisions of the early Christian church and which provided an example to avoid imitating for a new country hoping to get by on republican simplicity. Benjamin Franklin made this point when discussing whether to put into the text of the Constitution a requirement that the salaries of Congressmen remain both fixed and modest during their tenure in office. As James Madison summarized it in his notes,

Doc^r Franklyn said he approved of the amendment just made for rendering the salaries as fixed as possible; but disliked the word “*liberal*.” He would prefer the word “*moderate*” if it was necessary to substitute any other. He remarked the tendency of abuses in every case, to grow of themselves when once begun, and related very pleasantly the progression in ecclesiastical benefices, from the first departure from the gratuitous provision for the Apostles, to the establishment of the papal system.¹⁴

12. THE FEDERALIST 39.

13. De Witt Clinton, *A Countryman II*, NEW YORK JOURNAL (Dec. 13, 1787).

14. 1 THE RECORDS OF THE FEDERAL CONVENTION OF 1787 206 (Max Farrand, ed., 1911) (*Madison's Notes, June 12, 1787*) (statement of Benjamin Franklin).

The papal selection process was dominated by the secrecy, intrigue, and cabal of the papal conclave while the new presidential selection process needed to be open and as free of the influence of Congress as possible. Gouverneur Morris worried at the convention that if Congress were to elect the President, as opposed to the people, “it will be the work of intrigue, of cabal, and of faction; it will be like the election of a pope by a conclave of cardinals; real merit will rarely be the title to the appointment.”¹⁵

Indeed, for some Federalists, one of the purported virtues of the (for its time) rigorously democratic presidential election process was that it would make it highly unlikely that a sitting Pope could be elected President, which several Anti-Federalists, distressed by the no religious test clause of Article VI of the Constitution, worried might be possible.¹⁶ At the North Carolina State ratifying convention, for example, James Iredell said that he had read an Anti-Federalist pamphlet just that morning “in which the author states as a very serious danger, that the Pope of Rome might be elected President.”¹⁷ But he said that the qualifications in the Constitution for becoming President, including that he be a natural born citizen and a resident of America for fourteen years, made this scenario highly unlikely.¹⁸ But even if those qualifications were met, Iredell said that he would still need to be widely popular throughout the country to secure election as president, and could not be foisted upon the country via some “papist” coup. As Iredell put it, “A native of America must have very singular good fortune, who after residing fourteen years in his own country, should go to Europe, enter into Romish orders, obtain the promotion of Cardinal, afterwards that of Pope, and at length be so much in the confidence of his own country, as to be elected President.”¹⁹

For many of the founders, the papacy was the ultimate title of nobility, the “triple crown” bestowed upon the “Successor of the Prince of the Apostles” and the “Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church.” But Madison and Hamilton emphasized that the titles of nobility clause in Article I, section 9 of the Constitution, which prohibited the granting of such titles by the United States, was the “corner-stone of republican government”²⁰ and the “most decisive”

15. 2 THE RECORDS OF THE FEDERAL CONVENTION OF 1787 29 (Max Farrand, ed., 1911) (*Madison's Notes, July 17, 1787*).

16. Saul Cornell, *THE OTHER FOUNDERS: ANTI-FEDERALISM AND THE DISSENTING TRADITION* 41 (1999) (observing that the “fringe elements of the original Anti-Federalist coalition feared that the Constitution might make the pope president.”)

17. 30 THE DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF THE RATIFICATION OF THE CONSTITUTION 406 (John P. Kaminski & Gaspare J. Saladino eds., et. al., 2009).

18. *Id.* at 406–07.

19. *Id.* at 407. Another delegate, Samuel Johnston, said that he was “astonished” that there were “apprehensions that the Pope of Rome could be the President of the United States.” But given the need for broad, popular approval to become elected president, he added, “It might as well be said that the King of England or France, or the Grand Turk could be chosen to that office. It would have been as good an argument.” *Id.* at 409.

20. THE FEDERALIST 84 (Alexander Hamilton).

proof “of the republican complexion of this system.”²¹ As John Adams put it, “It should be considered, that there are in America no kings, princes, or nobles; no popes, cardinals, patriarchs, archbishops, bishops, or other ecclesiastical dignitaries.”²²

Perhaps most worrisome to many Americans as they formed the new Constitution was that the pope, as the putatively infallible Vicar of Christ, represented intellectual arrogance and theocratic aspirations, whereas the new republic they hoped to bring into being would be a home for free inquiry and religious liberty. The papacy loomed as a threat to the triumvirate of First Amendment freedoms—free exercise of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of press. With regard to the free exercise of religion, Madison observed in 1832 that “In the Papal System, Government and Religion are in a manner consolidated, & that is found to be the worst of Gov^{ts}” whereas it “remained for North America to bring the great & interesting subject [whether religion required official government support] to a fair, and finally to a decisive test.”²³ With regard to the freedom of speech, and inquiry more generally, Adams urged that “We know it to be our duty to read, examine, and judge for ourselves, even of ourselves, what is right. No priest nor pope has any right to say what I shall believe.”²⁴ And with regard to the freedom of the press, for a Pope who wielded the power of prior restraint via his imprimaturs, Adams again saw the papacy and the press as locked in inherent tension: “Has the art of printing increased democracy? It has humiliated kings; it has humiliated popes.”²⁵

B. Nineteenth Century “Americanism”: Heresy Made in the U.S.A.

For their part, the Popes of the Catholic Church throughout the nineteenth century mostly returned the favor, looking with equal skepticism upon the liberal constitutional forms of the United States. The popes of this era cast sweeping denunciations upon many things modern and democratic, in large part in reaction to the Catholic Church’s particularly negative experience with liberal and democratic reform movements in France, Italy, and Spain, which often proceeded along sharply anti-clerical lines.

In 1832, as Andrew Jackson was walking towards an easy reelection as President of the United States, Pope Gregory XVI wrote an encyclical entitled “On Liberalism and Religious Indifferentism” in which he lauded “trust and submission to princes” and condemned those who “consumed with the unbridled lust for freedom, are entirely devoted to impairing and destroying all

21. THE FEDERALIST 39 (James Madison).

22. *Letter from John Adams to Hendrik Calkoen (Oct. 10, 1780)* in 10 JOHN ADAMS, PAPERS OF JOHN ADAMS 216 (1996).

23. *Letter from James Madison to Rev. Adams (November 20, 1832)* in 9 THE WRITINGS OF JAMES MADISON 484–87 (Gaillard Hunt ed., 1900).

24. *Diary of John Adams (August 1, 1761)* in 2 THE WORKS OF JOHN ADAMS 219 (Charles Francis Adams ed., Boston, Little, Brown & Co. 1850).

25. *Letter from John Adams to John Taylor of Caroline (April 15, 1814)* in 6 THE WORKS OF JOHN ADAMS 450 (Charles Francis Adams ed., Boston, Little, Brown & Co. 1851).

rights of dominion.”²⁶ He denounced “the absurd and erroneous proposition which claims that liberty of conscience must be maintained for everyone” along with “that harmful and never sufficiently denounced freedom to publish any writings what-soever and disseminate them to the people.”²⁷ As he put it, “The Church has always taken action to destroy the plague of bad books.”²⁸ And he criticized those “shameless lovers of liberty” who attempted “to separate the Church from the state and to break the mutual concord between the temporal authority and the priesthood.”²⁹

In December 1864, as Abraham Lincoln won reelection to the presidency and the American Civil War was grinding to its conclusion, Pope Pius IX issued his *Syllabus of Errors*, an encyclopedia of mostly contemporary philosophical and theological ‘errors.’ One such error was that “Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true.”³⁰ Another error was that “The Church ought to be separated from the State, and the State from the Church.”³¹ Yet another error was that “Kings and princes are not only exempt from the jurisdiction of the Church, but are superior to the Church in deciding questions of jurisdiction.”³² And still another error was that “The Church has not the power of using force, nor has she any temporal power, direct or indirect.”³³

And in the late 1890s, on the brink of what would be called the “American century,” Pope Leo XIII warned of the dangers of the heresy he and others termed “Americanism,”³⁴ which included the belief that church and state should be “dissevered and divorced,”³⁵ as well as the expansion of democratic norms into church structure. Leo XIII acknowledged that “America seems destined for greater things” and that the Catholic Church seemed to be flourishing there.³⁶ But he said that it would be an error to conclude that the religious freedom enjoyed in America, in which the Catholic Church was “free to live and act without hindrance” was therefore an ideal arrangement.³⁷ Indeed, he stated that the Catholic Church would be even stronger in America if it “enjoyed the favor of the laws and the patronage of the public authority.”³⁸

26. Pope Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos* (Encyclical on Liberalism and Religious Indifferentism) § 19 (1832).

27. *Id.* § 14.

28. *Id.* § 16.

29. *Id.* § 20.

30. Pope Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors* § 15 (1864).

31. *Id.* § 55.

32. *Id.* § 54.

33. *Id.* § 24.

34. Pope Leo XIII, *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* (1899).

35. Pope Leo XIII, *Longinqua* ¶ 6 (1895).

36. *Id.* ¶¶ 13, 5.

37. *Id.* ¶ 6.

38. *Id.*

From the vantage point of late eighteenth-century Philadelphia, the papacy represented nearly the exact antithesis of the values that many leading American constitutional architects hoped to achieve. And from the standpoint of the nineteenth century Vatican, the American constitutional order was nearly synonymous with heresy.

C. A Mid-Twentieth Century Rapprochement Through Dialogue

Despite this oceanic gulf separating the two sides, there has since been considerable rapprochement. Thanks to a mid-twentieth century reconsideration by Catholics of the proper relationship between church and state—sparked in part by the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray, and solidified in the Declaration on Religious Freedom at the Second Vatican Council—it is not unusual to hear Popes today say, as Pope John Paul II did in 1997, “Reading the founding documents of the United States, one has to be impressed by the concept of freedom they enshrine.”³⁹ And perhaps thanks to the experience of the Presidency of John F. Kennedy, and the broader entrance of Catholics into the mainstream of American law and politics, it is hardly unusual for American presidents to greet Popes with open arms, as Ronald Reagan did in 1982 when he described the Vatican as “the fountainhead of so many of the values we in the free West hold dear,”⁴⁰ or as Bill Clinton did in 1993 when he said that “all Americans without regard to their religious faith are grateful to you, Your Holiness, for your moral leadership.”⁴¹ Clinton added that “America is a better, stronger, more just nation because of the influence that you have had on our world in recent years.”⁴²

George W. Bush called Pope John Paul II a “champion of human freedom” who, he said, “spoke of our ‘providential’ Constitution,” and “the self-evident truths about human dignity in our Declaration,” “that have led people all over the world to look to America with hope and respect.”⁴³ When Barack Obama greeted Pope Francis at the White House in 2015, he said that “in your humility, your embrace of simplicity, in the gentleness of your words and the generosity of your spirit, we see a living example of Jesus’ teachings, a leader whose moral authority comes not just through words but also through deeds.”⁴⁴ And he added that the excitement over the Pope’s visit “reveals how much all Americans, from every background and every faith, value the role that the Catholic Church plays

39. Pope John Paul II, *Comments on Reception of Lindy Boggs as Ambassador for the United States to the Holy See* (Dec. 16, 1997).

40. President Ronald Reagan, *Remarks Following a Meeting with Pope John Paul II in Vatican City* (June 7, 1982).

41. President William J. Clinton, *Remarks Welcoming Pope John Paul II in Colorado* (Aug. 12, 1993).

42. *Id.*

43. President George W. Bush, *Statement on the Death of Pope Paul II* (Apr. 2, 2005).

44. President Barack Obama, *Remarks at Arrival Ceremony of Pope Francis at White House* (Sept. 23, 2005).

in strengthening America.”⁴⁵ And today, America’s Vice-President, J.D. Vance, is an adult convert to Catholicism, and six of the nine justices of the Supreme Court are Catholic.⁴⁶

With the election of the first-ever American Pope, the story of a 250-year transatlantic transvaluation of constitutional values—and the indispensable role listening played in it—can perhaps be appreciated anew. From the late eighteenth century to the late twentieth century, the United States and the Catholic Church shifted their views of each other through a historical process by which they corrected themselves and learned things from the other side, testing and revising abstract theories formed in relative isolation against lived experience. Both sides made the long journey from sharp, polarized antagonism and mutual suspicion to mutual respect by listening to each other, discarding long-held caricatures, and noting how the other half really lived, and what it was like to live amongst them.

The Catholic Church, for example, came to see liberal constitutional forms not as a threat to religious life, but as a wise and just arrangement, by observing their real-world consequences in America. In particular, it saw in the American experience of liberal constitutional democracy a model of political life that was built upon principles of religious freedom and organized around the protection of the rights of individuals, but was not, unlike the experience of some liberal democracies in Europe, anti-clerical or hostile to religion. Indeed, Catholics thrived in America and faced far less persecution than they did in Europe. As early as the 1830s, Tocqueville could observe that America was at once the most democratic country on earth, but also the one in which “the Catholic religion is making most progress.”⁴⁷

Likewise, American constitutional actors came to see that the Catholic Church was not a threat to democracy by observing the actual conduct of Catholics in America. Once again, Tocqueville perceived this earlier than most. “I think that it is wrong to regard the Catholic religion,” he wrote in 1835, “as a natural enemy of democracy.”⁴⁸ He argued instead that American Catholics could be faithful and yet be “the most republican and the most democratic class there is in the United States.”⁴⁹ And by the middle part of the twentieth century, the political theorist Leo Strauss could observe that, despite the Catholic Church’s earlier reservations in the nineteenth century, after the Second World War it was Catholic thinkers who became some of the world’s most prominent defenders of the concept of natural right and natural rights articulated in

45. *Id.*

46. See J.D. Vance, *COMMUNION: FINDING MY WAY BACK TO FAITH* (2026); Frank Newport, *The Religion of the Supreme Court Justices*, GALLUP (Apr. 8, 2022).

47. 2 ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* 424 (Harvey C. Mansfield & Delba Winthrop trans., Univ. of Chi. Press 2000) (1840).

48. 1 TOCQUEVILLE, *supra* note 47, at 275–76.

49. *Id.* at 275.

America's Declaration of Independence.⁵⁰ In other words, Americans came to see from experience that Catholics could be fully Catholic and yet also fully American.

II. POPE LEO'S THEOLOGY OF DIALOGUE: "A DIFFERENT KIND OF COMMUNICATION"

When he appeared on the loggia on May 8, 2025, after the white smoke settled, Pope Leo XIV shocked the world as the Catholic Church's first ever American-born pontiff. Leading up to the conclave, well-respected authorities within the Catholic Church confidently predicted that there was no way an American could ever emerge from the Sistine Chapel as pope.⁵¹ But in some respects, Pope Leo's surprise election was the fruit of that 250-year story of dialogue between the Catholic Church and America that began in mutual suspicion and concluded in relative harmony. It seems unlikely that an America with the values of the late eighteenth century, with its republican-era skepticism of the papacy, or a Vatican of the nineteenth century, with its papal bulls denouncing the heresy of "Americanism," could have produced and converged upon a "papible" cardinal from Chicago.

But Pope Leo is not only the fruit of that dialogue. He is also a theologian and philosopher of dialogue himself. Indeed, over the first year of his pontificate, from his first appearance on the loggia as Pope to his first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, he has developed a uniquely rich, nuanced set of meditations on *how* to communicate with each other.

Pope Leo's first words to the world spoke directly to the challenge of dialogue and communication across deep suspicion. "Peace be with you all!" he enthusiastically announced.⁵² And in nearly every sentence of his first address, he stressed dialogue, bridge-building, and connection—physical and spiritual—with God and others. "All of us are in God's hands," he said. "So let us move forward, without fear, together hand in hand with God and with one another."⁵³ "Humanity needs Christ as the bridge that can lead us to God and his love. Help us, one and all, to build bridges through dialogue and encounter, joining together as one people, always at peace."⁵⁴ And looking out over St. Peter's

50. Leo Strauss, *NATURAL RIGHT AND HISTORY* 2 (1950) ("Present-day American social science, as far as it is not Roman Catholic social science, is dedicated to the proposition that all men are endowed by the evolutionary process or by a mysterious fate with many kinds of urges and aspirations, but certainly with no natural right.")

51. See, e.g., *Interview with Bishop Robert Barron*, EWTN NEWS (May 7, 2025) ("I think it is very unlikely an American will be elected Pope" and quoting Cardinal Robert George who said "there will not be an American Pope until we go into political decline.") See also Michael J. O'Loughlin, *An American pope was unthinkable until it wasn't. What's it mean?*, NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER, (May 4, 2026) (collecting similar predictions).

52. Pope Leo XIV, *Apostolic Blessing "Urbi et Orbi" from the Central Loggia of the Vatican Basilica* (May 8, 2025).

53. *Id.*

54. *Id.*

Square and Rome beyond, he said that “we must look for ways to be a missionary Church, a Church that builds bridges and encourages dialogue, a Church ever open to welcoming, like this Square with its open arms, all those who are in need of our charity, our presence, our readiness to dialogue and our love.”⁵⁵

One week later at his inaugural mass, he organized his first homily around a theological meditation on “harmony.” The papal conclave, he said, had been inspired by the Holy Spirit, “who was able to bring us into harmony, like musical instruments, so that our heartstrings could vibrate in a single melody.”⁵⁶ Moving forward, Christians, he said, were “called through our baptism to build God’s house in fraternal communion, in the harmony of the Spirit, in the coexistence of diversity.”⁵⁷ Saint Augustine, he noted, had said that “The Church consists of all those who are in harmony with their brothers and sisters and who love their neighbour.”⁵⁸ And in a world marked by “too much discord, too many wounds caused by hatred, violence, prejudice, the fear of difference,” he said that his “first great desire” was for “a united Church,” that would not close itself off into small groups convinced of their own superiority, but would serve as “a leaven of harmony for humanity.”⁵⁹

In October 2025, he returned to this theme of harmony. He acknowledged the tensions within the Catholic Church over polarities like “unity and diversity, tradition and novelty, authority and participation.”⁶⁰ But he urged his listeners, aided by prayer, to not allow those tensions within the Church to become “ideological contrapositions and harmful polarizations” that could hopelessly divide it.⁶¹ Life in the Church was not a quest to rid itself of its various disagreements and polarities. “It is not a question of resolving them by reducing one to the other.”⁶² Rather, he said, the goal should be “allowing them to be purified by the Spirit, so that they may be harmonized and oriented toward a common discernment.”⁶³

“Peace,” “harmony,” and “unity” have thus been key themes of the first year of his pontificate. And they were achieved, he consistently said, not through the elimination of disagreement, but the adoption of a certain manner or spirit in which inevitable disagreements are navigated. “Peace begins with each one of us: in the way we look at others, listen to others, and speak about

55. *Id.*

56. Pope Leo XIV, *Homily at Inaugural Mass, Saint Peter’s Square* (May 18, 2025).

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.*

59. *Id.*

60. Pope Leo XIV, *Homily at Saint Peter’s Square* (Oct. 26, 2025).

61. *Id.*

62. *Id.*

63. *Id.*

others” he told journalists on May 12, 2025.⁶⁴ And he added, “In this sense, the way we communicate is of fundamental importance.”⁶⁵

This is a remarkable statement for the Vicar of Christ. One *might* have supposed that what was of “fundamental importance” for him would have been conversion to Christianity, consensus on matters of faith, and convergence on points of doctrine. To put it in grammatical terms, one might have supposed that the pope would care exclusively about verbs—doing or abstaining from certain things, and believing or not believing in certain things. But instead, he stresses the fundamental importance also of adverbs—of doing things and saying things in a certain way, lovingly, not aggressively or in a spirit of domination or humiliation. As he put it, the Christian faith, particularly the Sermon on the Mount and its injunction that “blessed are the peacemakers,” inspired its adherents to “a different kind of communication.”⁶⁶

If peace and harmony depended upon a “different kind of communication,” that “different kind of communication” in turn depended upon three key activities which Leo has identified repeatedly throughout the first year of his papacy: listening, critical thinking, and speaking with charity.

A. Listening: “How important it is to listen!”

For Pope Leo, all things seem to begin with listening. The new American pope’s friends describe him as an excellent listener. Listening is an underrated virtue among leaders today. But it may have been one of the key reasons the cardinals elected him.

Many cardinals have noted this quality. Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, the Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization, for example, noted that Pope Leo “is endowed with a capacity for deep and patient listening. Before making any decision, he devotes himself to careful study and reflection. He expresses his feelings and preferences without seeking to impose them.”⁶⁷

Writing in *The Augustinian* magazine days before the papal conclave met in 2025, a teacher in Philadelphia named Brendan Towell recalled a meeting with then Fr. Robert Prevost at a retreat in 2010.⁶⁸ Towell said that he spoke with Fr. Prevost about discerning his own vocation and possibly entering the Augustinian Order. And he said that even though he did not ultimately pursue that path, that “conversation has remained with me for years.”⁶⁹ “What struck me,” he said, “wasn’t just that he listened. It was *how* he listened.”⁷⁰ Despite the

64. Pope Leo XIV, *Address to Representatives of the Media in Paul VI Audience Hall*, Vatican (May 12, 2025).

65. *Id.*

66. *Id.*

67. Alessandro Gisotti, *Pope Francis, Pope Leo XIV, and the urgency of listening*, VATICAN NEWS (May 31, 2025).

68. Brendan Towell, *An Augustinian for these Times: A Personal Reflection on Meeting Cardinal Robert Prevost, O.S.A.*, THE AUGUSTINIAN (May 2025).

69. *Id.*

70. *Id.*

busyness of the week, “Fr. Prevost gave me his time and his attention. In a world that often rushes past the individual heart, he made mine feel seen.”⁷¹ And he then added, “I can’t help but think: an Augustinian would make an excellent pope . . . he’s a man who listens. He gives time to the young and the searching and sees the human person before needing to read their resume.”⁷²

Robert Prevost, who became pope just a few days after the publication of that essay, may have a particular talent as an individual for listening. But in his meditations on the subject as Pope Leo, he anchors listening in a broader theological and anthropological context.

He begins with the observation that the God of the Bible is not just the Creator, Lawgiver, and Redeemer, but is also a God who listens. In reflecting on the Old Testament story of Moses and the burning bush during a Lenten address, Pope Leo observed that “In revealing himself to Moses in the burning bush, God himself teaches us that listening is one of his defining characteristics.”⁷³ In Exodus, Pope Leo noted, the story of the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt begins with a God who listens. “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry.”⁷⁴ And as Pope Leo puts it, “Hearing the cry of the oppressed is the beginning of a story of liberation in which the Lord calls Moses, sending him to open a path of salvation for his children who have been reduced to slavery.”⁷⁵

The Church, in turn, is an institution which strives to listen to the Word of God. In the New Testament, Leo notes: “How important it is to listen! Jesus says, ‘My sheep listen to my voice.’”⁷⁶ Accordingly, As Pope Leo put it, the Christian life requires an “inner openness to listening” that must be created and cultivated.⁷⁷ Indeed, that receptive listening is itself an imitation of God’s own defining characteristic as a listener. “We must allow God to teach us how to listen *as he does*.”⁷⁸ Listening *in a certain way* therefore—not just to be polite or to ready ourselves for more effective attack—is itself an imitation of the divine.

From an anthropological perspective, Pope Leo likes to stress that listening at once helps to subdue the ego, encourages epistemic humility, and opens one up to genuine communion and the search for truth.

Speaking to his own chapter of the Augustinian Order in September 2025, he urged his confreres to create “an atmosphere of listening: of listening to God,

71. *Id.*

72. *Id.*

73. Pope Leo XIV, *Message for Lent 2026 on the theme “Listening and Fasting: Lent as a Time of Conversion”* (Feb. 13, 2026).

74. *Id.*

75. *Id.*

76. Pope Leo XIV, *Homily in the Crypt of Saint Peter’s Basilica* (May 11, 2025).

77. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 73.

78. *Id.*

listening to others.”⁷⁹ And he underlined the point about epistemic humility, a consistent theme in his discussion of dialogue. “Let no one think they have all the answers.”⁸⁰

In a homily on October 26, 2025, in St. Peter’s Basilica, he emphasized that point again, noting how listening can be an antidote to pride, domination, and hegemonic projects. “No one possesses the whole truth; we must all humbly seek it and seek it together.”⁸¹ Accordingly, in the Church at least, “[n]o one is called to dominate; all are called to serve. No one should impose his or her own ideas; we must all listen to one another.”⁸²

Listening is also the key first step in forging genuine relationships, with both God and neighbor. “The willingness to listen,” he said “is the first way we demonstrate our desire to enter into relationship with someone.”⁸³ “Only where there is listening,” he told Italian bishops in June 2025, “can communion be born.”⁸⁴ And on May 11, 2025, speaking in the crypt of St. Peter’s, he emphasized how listening—in a spirit of epistemic humility—can help build bridges.

I think it is important for all of us to learn how to listen more, to enter into dialogue. First and foremost with the Lord: always, listen to the Word of God. Then also listen to others, to know how to build bridges, to know how to listen without judging, not closing the doors thinking that we have all the truth and no one else can tell us the truth.⁸⁵

Finally, listening is the key first step to opening oneself up to a more secure grasp of truth and reality. Listening is not just a subjective, solipsistic activity focused inwards. It is not just tuning in to the sound of one’s own drummer and shutting out the world. Rather, it helps direct the mind and soul outwards, with greater acuity, towards external reality. Quieting one’s self and listening may appear passive, but it helps reality break through the occasional prison of the self. In the theological context, he said, “listening to the word in the liturgy teaches us to listen to the truth of reality.”⁸⁶ And in the broader anthropological context, the search for truth itself was often dialectical and required dialogue. “[O]nly where there is listening can communion be born, and only where there is communion does truth become credible.”⁸⁷

79. Pope Leo XIV, *Homily for the Opening Mass of the 188th General Chapter of the Order of Saint Augustine* (Sept. 1, 2025).

80. *Id.*

81. Pope Leo XIV, *Homily for the Jubilee of the Synodal Teams and Participatory Bodies* (Oct. 26, 2025).

82. *Id.*

83. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 73.

84. Pope Leo XIV, *Address to the Italian Episcopal Conference* (June 17, 2025).

85. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 76.

86. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 73.

87. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 84.

B. Critical Thinking: “The world needs free, rigorous and objective information.”

For Pope Leo, listening provides the mind and heart with data about the external world. But that data must then be sifted, filtered, and critically analyzed. As Pope, Leo has consistently emphasized the importance of critical thinking to dialogue. A former math major at Villanova, he regularly invokes the rigors of a careful, scientific method, even in the context of Church teaching.

For example, when speaking to the “Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice” Foundation on May 13, 2025, he said that “we must rediscover, emphasize and cultivate our duty to train others in critical thinking.”⁸⁸ When the Church develops its doctrine of social teaching, it does so, he said, via a method that parallels the scientific method, emphasizing research and critical inquiry. “Doctrine,” he said perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, “can be a synonym of ‘science,’ ‘discipline’ and ‘knowledge.’”⁸⁹ Thus, Church doctrine can “be seen as the product of research, and hence of hypotheses, discussions, progress and setbacks, all aimed at conveying a reliable, organized and systematic body of knowledge about a given issue.”⁹⁰ The process of research is thus “a common, collective and even multidisciplinary pursuit of truth.”⁹¹

And once again, Pope Leo emphasizes the adverbial *manner* in which inquiry is conducted and knowledge is acquired, rather than the ultimate, bottom-line answers that may be generated. “[M]ore important than our problems or eventual solutions,” he said, “is the way we approach them, guided by criteria of discernment, sound ethical principles and openness to God’s grace.”⁹² Speaking of the Church’s social teaching, “Where social questions are concerned, knowing how best to approach them is more important than providing immediate responses to why things happen or how to deal with them.”⁹³ “The aim,” he said, “is to learn how to confront problems, for these are always different, since every generation is new, and faces new challenges, dreams and questions.”⁹⁴ Doctrine, or what he calls “serious, serene, and rigorous discourse,” “aims to teach us primarily how to approach problems and, even more importantly, how to approach people.”⁹⁵

Disciplined, critical thinking helps one get out of the self-imposed, internal, often narrow grooves of one’s own mind into the sunlight of a broader reality. Just as listening helps external reality break into the mind, critical thinking enables people to sift that information to see beyond themselves. Meditating on a reading from Luke in which Jesus healed a crippled woman

88. Pope Leo XIV, *Address to Members of the “Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice” Foundation* (May 17, 2025).

89. *Id.*

90. *Id.*

91. *Id.*

92. *Id.*

93. *Id.*

94. *Id.*

95. *Id.*

who had been bent over for eighteen years, incapable of standing upright and looking up, he compared her situation to one who was closed in on oneself and “unable to look beyond herself.”⁹⁶ Her affliction was not chiefly physical but intellectual and psychological, the prisoner of a “self-centered perspective.”⁹⁷ Education and critical thinking, he said, unbends people, lifts them up and enables them to see beyond themselves, their experiences, ideas, convictions, and projects. It is only through that process of looking to a broader horizon beyond oneself by which “mature judgment” can be formed.⁹⁸

Critical thinking operates best, he said, in forums which provide the opportunity to hear multiple sides of questions. Forums which “provide a place where people can meet and talk,”⁹⁹ and that encourage a “‘culture of encounter’ through dialogue and social friendship”¹⁰⁰ are ideal. He mentioned as iconic examples, the “ancient Roman Forum or the medieval square” in which robust debate and discussion could occur.¹⁰¹ And he also stressed that forums that permitted the poor to speak were essential. Although their viewpoints are often disregarded, he said, their perspectives, although “far from the centers of power,” were “vital if we are to see the world through God’s eyes.”¹⁰²

But in his reflections on critical thinking, he said that there were many other forums and contexts in the contemporary world which discouraged careful and systematic reflection. On Ash Wednesday, 2026, he lamented what he called “the ashes of critical thinking” throughout the modern world.¹⁰³ In the context of ecclesial settings, he noted that “indoctrination” is the antithesis of the scientific approach to “doctrine,” because it “stifles critical judgement and undermines the sacred freedom of conscience, even if erroneous.”¹⁰⁴ And in the broader public square, “There is so little dialogue around us” he said.¹⁰⁵ “Shouting often replaces it, not infrequently in the form of fake news and irrational arguments proposed by a few loud voices.”¹⁰⁶ This was particularly true, he said, in the context of social media and digital communication, which often cast its users into intellectual monocultures that tended to radicalize and perpetually enrage them. “By grouping people into bubbles of easy consensus and easy outrage, these algorithms reduce our ability to listen and think

96. Pope Leo XIV, *Homily for the Eucharistic Celebration with Students from the Pontifical Universities* (Oct. 27, 2025).

97. *Id.*

98. *Id.*

99. Pope Leo XIV, *Address to Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See* (Jan. 9, 2026).

100. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 84.

101. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 99.

102. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 88.

103. Pope Leo XIV, *Homily on Ash Wednesday* (Feb. 18, 2026).

104. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 88.

105. *Id.*

106. *Id.*

critically, and increase social polarization.”¹⁰⁷ If critical thinking is designed to unbend people, social media tends to bend them back even further upon themselves.

In addition to seeing broader horizons, critical thinking also helps people sift fact from fiction, whether in the laboratory, church, or public square. And in the contemporary epistemic ecosystem, with the proliferation of bots, fake news, and deepfakes, the ability to see through fiction is particularly vital. Speaking on January 24, 2026, for the sixtieth World Day of Social Communications, he underlined how education was the key to ensuring that future generations could do the vital work of thinking for themselves and critically examining the sources of news and information. Education increases “our personal ability to think critically,” he said.¹⁰⁸ It helps one evaluate the trustworthiness of news sources and understand the psychological mechanisms of online deception. And it could help train us to better “think[] for ourselves” in an era when increasing reliance upon artificial intelligence “threatens to diminish our cognitive, emotional and communication skills,” and thereby outsource our judgment to algorithms and large language models.¹⁰⁹

For Pope Leo, the stakes for sifting fact from fiction via critical thinking are high. “The world needs free, rigorous and objective information” he has said.¹¹⁰ For in its absence, people are subject to deception and manipulation. Speaking to journalists, he encouraged them to think of themselves as “a barrier against those who, through the ancient art of lying, seek to create divisions in order to rule by dividing. You can also be a bulwark of civility against the quicksand of approximation and post-truth.”¹¹¹

And quoting the philosopher Hannah Arendt, he noted that the ability to sift fact from fiction through critical inquiry was vital to the existential health of the public square. “It is worth remembering Hannah Arendt’s warning,” he said, that “the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction and the distinction between true and false no longer exist.”¹¹²

In the late eighteenth century, Americans suspected that the papacy and the Catholic Church were hostile to thinking for oneself. But today, its supreme pontiff is becoming one of the world’s leading defenders of critical inquiry.

C. Speaking with Charity: Dialogue as a “Way of Life”

After listening carefully to others, and subjecting what one learns to rigorous, critical investigation, the next step is actual dialogue with others. For

107. Pope Leo XIV, *Message for the 60th World Day of Social Communications* (Jan. 24, 2026).

108. *Id.*

109. *Id.*

110. Pope Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the MINDS International Association Conference* (Oct. 9, 2025).

111. *Id.*

112. *Id.*

Pope Leo, dialogue comes *after* listening and critical thinking. “Saint Augustine reminds us,” he told his Augustinian Order, “that before we speak, we first must listen.”¹¹³ And just as he emphasizes the *manner* in which one listens and thinks, he also stresses that dialogue should be conducted in a certain *way*. “Peace begins with what we say and do and *how* we say and do it,” he added.¹¹⁴ Dialogue, he has said, is a “way of life” in which participants seek the truth in a spirit of respect for truth and one’s interlocutors.¹¹⁵

Speaking as a theologian, Pope Leo has said that dialogue is at the heart of the Christian way of life. Revelation itself, for Leo, is “a dialogue, in which God speaks to humans as though to friends.”¹¹⁶ Speaking of the Bible, he has said that its ultimate purpose is “to make Christ known and to open dialogue with God.”¹¹⁷ Within the “ecclesial community” of the church, he says, one reads the Bible “to get to know Christ and, through Him, to enter into a relationship with God, a relationship that can be understood as a conversation, a dialogue.”¹¹⁸ Through prayer, “God then comes towards us and enters into conversation with us.”¹¹⁹ Conversation and dialogue are thus central to Leo’s understanding of the Christian life.

As with listening and critical thinking, the first step of dialogue for Leo seems to involve getting out of oneself and opening oneself up to a wider reality. Speaking theologically of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life, Leo said that the gift of the Spirit “opens our lives to love.”¹²⁰ The presence of the Spirit “breaks down our hardness of heart, our narrowness of mind, our selfishness, the fears that enchain us and the narcissism that makes us think only of ourselves.”¹²¹ And it is in that spirit of openness to others, and openness to transformation of one’s own views, in which dialogue should happen. “Dialogue is not a tactic or a tool,” he said, “but a way of life—a journey of the heart that transforms everyone involved, the one who listens and the one who speaks.”¹²² Through a good conversation with others, both parties are potentially transformed and come dialectically closer to truth.

But for dialogue to convey its interlocutors to a more secure grasp of truth, Pope Leo has said, the words we use must retain a certain fixed meaning that denotes reality. Language is the currency of communication. Therefore, “in

113. Pope Leo XIV, *Video Message to the Augustinian Province of St. Thomas of Villanova* (Aug. 29, 2025).

114. *Id.* (emphasis added).

115. Pope Leo XIV, *Address Celebrating the Sixtieth Anniversary of Nostra Aetate* “Walking Together in Hope” (Oct. 28, 2025).

116. Pope Leo XIV, *General Audience Address on the Feast of our Lady of Lourdes* (Feb. 11, 2026).

117. *Id.*

118. *Id.*

119. *Id.*

120. Pope Leo XIV, *Homily for the Holy Mass on the Solemnity of Pentecost, Jubilee of Movements, Associations and New Communities* (June 8, 2025).

121. *Id.*

122. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 115.

order to engage in dialogue,” he told diplomats in January 2026, “there needs to be agreement on the words and concepts that are used.”¹²³ Words convey things outside our minds. Therefore, for conversation to help our minds bend closer towards reality, the words we use in conversation must have a stable meaning. “We need words once again to express distinct and clear realities unequivocally. Only in this way can authentic dialogue resume without misunderstandings.”¹²⁴

But today, he said, dialogue is threatened by a crumbling confidence in the fixed meaning of words. “The meaning of words is ever more fluid, and the concepts they represent are increasingly ambiguous,” he told diplomats.¹²⁵ “Language is no longer the preferred means by which human beings come to know and encounter one another.”¹²⁶ Indeed, he said, in the name of purported liberation, words have often come to mean whatever their individual users happen to wish them to mean. But this, he argues, is the reverse of freedom and can paradoxically inhibit genuine dialogue. “Freedom of speech and expression is guaranteed precisely by the certainty of language and the fact that every term is anchored in the truth.”¹²⁷ In the absence of this certainty, particularly in the West he said, “the space for genuine freedom of expression is rapidly shrinking.”¹²⁸ As he elaborated in his address to diplomats in early 2026, “a new Orwellian-style language is developing which, in an attempt to be increasingly inclusive, ends up excluding those who do not conform to the ideologies that are fueling it.”¹²⁹

Thus, when words lose their connection to reality, and reality itself becomes reducible to mere subjective opinion, people may continue to interact with each other, but they cannot really understand each other. Quoting Saint Augustine, he said, they are like two people “who are forced to stay together without either of them knowing the other’s language.”¹³⁰ Under those conditions, Leo says, reality itself becomes “ultimately incommunicable.”¹³¹ In that context, Saint Augustine said, people would often prefer to talk to “dumb animals” than speak with people whom they cannot understand.¹³² “Rediscovering the meaning of words,” Leo says, is therefore “perhaps one of the primary challenges of our time.”¹³³

123. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 99.

124. *Id.*

125. *Id.*

126. *Id.*

127. *Id.*

128. *Id.*

129. *Id.*

130. *Id.*

131. *Id.*

132. *Id.*

133. *Id.*

Another fundamental challenge for dialogue today, he says, is to “disarm our language.”¹³⁴ At the same time that words are losing their fixed meaning, they are also becoming increasingly weaponized. When words lose their status as stable points of access to reality, and instead become putty in the hands of the powerful, they can be used to deceive or manipulate. And they can also be used as weapons to harm. For Leo, dialogue today is threatened by an increasingly angry and aggressive use of words throughout the world. As he put it in early 2026, he said that “in the contortions of semantic ambiguity, language is becoming more and more a weapon with which to deceive, or to strike and offend opponents.”¹³⁵ And as he put it in *Magnifica Humanitas*, “Let us reject the Manichean notions so typical of that mindset of violence that divides the world into those who are good and those who are evil,”¹³⁶

Leo thus has called for Christians to “disarm” their words. This was not just an anodyne matter of politeness, but for him a theological imperative. It was a matter of respecting the *imago dei* in all one’s conversation partners, even those in the distressing disguise of one’s intellectual and political opponents. “The first contribution we can make towards a more humane civilization,” he said in his encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, “is to be mindful of our words.”¹³⁷ Speaking to conservative members of parliament in Europe, Leo said that “the ability to disagree, listen attentively, and even to enter into dialogue with those whom we may regard as opponents, bears witness to our reverence for the God-given dignity of all men and women.”¹³⁸ And speaking more anthropologically, he said that “the mark of any civilized society is that differences are debated with courtesy and respect.”¹³⁹

At the beginning of Lent, 2026, Leo thus called on Catholic Christians to not only do things like abstain from meat on Fridays, but to also avoid “harsh words and rash judgement.”¹⁴⁰ He asked them to refrain “from slander and speaking ill of those who are not present and cannot defend themselves.”¹⁴¹ And beyond abstaining from harsh words, he encouraged them to substitute “words of hope and peace” for “words of hatred” by striving to “measure our words and cultivate kindness and respect” at home, with friends, online, and in the public arena.¹⁴²

Dialogue is a “way of life” for Pope Leo, it seems, because it is an extension of the Christian life and worldview. It is a mutual and collaborative search for truth, understood as objective and knowable, outside the human mind

134. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 73.

135. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 123.

136. Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas* § 222 (May 15, 2016).

137. *Id.* at § 214.

138. Pope Leo XIV, *Address to Members of the “European Conservatives and Reformists” Group of the European Parliament* (Dec. 10, 2025).

139. *Id.*

140. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 134.

141. *Id.*

142. *Id.*

and yet within the grasp of those who seek it. It is not a relativistic exchange of perspectives or a mushy search for middle ground or endless compromise. Rather, it depends on the rigors of critical thinking and words having precise meaning and a stable connection to reality. As Leo put it, “authentic dialogue begins not in compromise, but in conviction—in the deep roots of our own belief that give us the strength to reach out to others in love.”¹⁴³ But as that statement indicates, dialogue can also be a form of charity, through which all participants are transformed. Since all are fallible and no one has a monopoly on truth, dialogue can help all come away better informed. And since all conversation partners—even the most seemingly tedious and annoying—are created in the image of God, they deserve a baseline of respect and courtesy. Words pick out objective elements of reality, but they can also give life and inspire, just as they can tear down, humiliate, and destroy. As he put it in his encyclical, “spoken words can change our mood for better or for worse.”¹⁴⁴ For Leo, the point of dialogue is to try to help grasp external reality while also helping to build up a culture of life, peace, and love.

Pope Leo urged his readers to “Let us reject the Manichean notions so typical of that mindset of violence that divides the world into those who are good and those who are evil.”¹⁴⁵

III. THE RELEVANCE OF DIALOGUE FOR AMERICA’S CONSTITUTION TODAY

What does any of this have to do with the American Constitution today? Quoting Tertullian who once asked a similar question around 200 A.D., “what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem,”¹⁴⁶ one might ask today “what does Rome have to do with Philadelphia or Washington, D.C.?” The election of the first ever Pope from the United States may be a point of pride for Catholic Americans. The story of the dialogue between the Catholic Church and America may be a subject of curiosity for those with an interest in world history. And Pope Leo’s theology of discourse that he has developed in the first year of his papacy may be an instructive and even inspiring meditation for those who happen to share his Christian faith. But it does not seem to have any immediate or obvious relevance for understanding America’s Constitution today. It does not shed light on any doctrinal questions concerning the Free Exercise or Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. And it does not seem to even trigger any major questions regarding the relationship between church and state or the varying understandings of that concept.

And yet, America’s Constitution is not just a lawyer’s document, containing rules fit for adjudication before courts in cases or controversies. It is, of course, law, indeed America’s supreme law. Accordingly, lawyers must interpret it using standard, traditional techniques for reading law, and courts

143. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 115.

144. Pope Leo XIV, *supra* note 136 at § 214.

145. *Id.* at § 222.

146. Tertullian, DE PRAESCRPTIONE HAERETICORUM [or THE PRESCRIPTION AGAINST HERETICS] ch. 7.

must apply it as rules of decision in cases. But it is more than that too. It is also a means, or even a technology, of bringing together people of diverse religious, racial, ethnic, socio-economic backgrounds. It was originally designed as a structural device by which people of contending worldviews and diverging interests could nonetheless live, work, and reason together in relative peace. The founding-era generation repudiated the consensus view at the time articulated by Montesquieu that republican government could only be maintained among an intellectually and culturally homogenous population. In place of that traditional view, the designers of America's Constitution proposed that a heterogenous population would actually be *better* for republican government if certain institutions like representation, the large extended republic, federalism, and a separation of powers could be put in place to channel and moderate the inevitable friction and discord between disparate groups.

In addition to those institutional features of America's Constitution, its original founders, as well as some of its most articulate interpreters over the years, argued that the political and legal institutions of the Constitution themselves rested upon a deeper set of cultural or civic norms. And some of those key norms addressed the adverbs of dialogue—the manner or spirit in which Americans reasoned and spoke with each other under the new Constitution.

For the mechanisms of the Constitution to function properly, it depended upon a people who could reason with each other rigorously, on the basis of hard empirical reality. Some framers often described the ideal republican sphere using the metaphor of a hot “furnace” that could help burn away fiction from fact. Indeed, many were self-conscious that America was attempting to do something new and important on the world stage: create a government based upon critical, independent thinking. At the outset of the *Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton observed that it had been “frequently remarked” that it “seems to have been reserved to the people of this country” to decide the “important question” of whether societies of men were capable of governing themselves on the basis of “reflection and choice,” or whether they were forever destined to depend upon “accident and force.”¹⁴⁷ And writing as Publius, Hamilton promised to make arguments that would be “open to all” and “at least be offered in a spirit which will not disgrace the cause of truth.”¹⁴⁸

But at the same time, constitutional governance also depended upon a people who could conduct that intense debate across inevitable disagreement in a manner that did not completely incinerate its interlocutors, in which people listened to the other side, left open room for self-doubt, and encouraged compromise when possible. In that same first *Federalist Paper*, Hamilton said that those who engage in public debate should take a “lesson of moderation” from the fact that we “see wise and good men on the wrong as well as on the right side of questions of the first magnitude to society.”¹⁴⁹ He explained that

147. THE FEDERALIST 1.

148. *Id.*

149. *Id.*

“so powerful are the causes which serve to give a false bias to the judgment,” that those who are “ever so much persuaded of their being in the right in any controversy” should think twice before adopting an “intolerant spirit” in the conduct of debate.¹⁵⁰ In a similar manner, Benjamin Franklin urged the delegates in Philadelphia who had reservations about some elements of the Constitution that they “doubt a little of their infallibility” and sign the Constitution.¹⁵¹ George Washington implored the state ratifying conventions to conduct their deliberations about the Constitution in a “spirit of amity” and “mutual deference and concession.”¹⁵² And James Madison urged his readers in Federalist 14 to “hearken not to the unnatural voice, which tells you that the people of America, knit together as they are by so many chords of affection, can no longer live together as members of the same family.”¹⁵³

And centuries later, Judge Learned Hand would channel some of these founding-era ideals when he said that “the spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias.”¹⁵⁴

If America’s Constitution depends upon a set of cultural norms regarding the *manner* in which we handle our differences, through intellectual debate and epistemic doubt, conversation and concession, argument and amity, then the contemporary social, intellectual, and political trendlines of mutual suspicion, intellectual siloing, and polarization which Pope Leo seems concerned about on the spiritual level may also have constitutional significance for us at home. A nation closely, deeply, and bitterly divided, and occasionally teetering on the edge of a “national divorce,” poses something of an existential threat to the constitutional project of *e pluribus unum*.

For in place of the deep mutual suspicion between the United States and the Vatican that reigned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both now find themselves confronting a new set of fault lines that run more *within* their respective communities than between them. The dividing lines and mutual suspicions between “Red America” and “Blue America,” as between the “left” and “right” within the Catholic Church worldwide, are seemingly just as deep and entrenched as the divisions that once existed between eighteenth century republicans and ultramontanists.

In America, those divisions seem to have, over time, both warped the constitutional system and sapped confidence in American constitutional values. More Americans have increasingly given up on dialogue with those with whom

150. *Id.*

151. 2 THE RECORDS OF THE FEDERAL CONVENTION OF 1787 643 (Max Farrand, ed., 1911) (*Madison’s Notes, September 17, 1787*) (statement of Benjamin Franklin).

152. *Id.* at 667 (*Letter of the President of the Federal Convention, Dated September 17, 1787, to the President of Congress, Transmitting the Constitution.*)

153. THE FEDERALIST 14.

154. Judge Learned Hand, *The Spirit of Liberty* (May 21, 1944) in THE SPIRIT OF LIBERTY: PAPERS AND ADDRESSES OF LEARNED HAND 189, 190 (Irving Dillard, ed. 2d ed. 1953).

they disagree, convinced that the other side is evil, operates on bad faith, and is not deserving of civic friendship or respect. As people talk less with each other and converse more with their own “tribes” inside comfortable bubbles, both sides of the political spectrum, and especially the leaders of the two major political parties, have gradually become more confident in their own positions and more sharply polarized. As polarization has increased, it has become increasingly harder to find common ground in Congress to find solutions to common problems through ambitious legislation. As Congress has become more passive and sclerotic, the presidency and the judiciary have attempted to fill that void. Most key national decisions are today made by the President through executive orders and administrative decisions—on issues ranging from immigration, student debt, and foreign policy—often seeking maximalist victories, which tend to swing wildly between different presidential administrations. And these decisions are then inevitably challenged in court, which incentivizes lawfare, puts increasing pressure on the judiciary to “save democracy,” risks politicizing the courts, and has lately exposed judges to increasing threats of violence. As our politics have become more unstable, dysfunctional, and litigious, with two armies perpetually clashing by night, more Americans have started to question the legitimacy of our institutions and the viability of democracy, compromise, limited government, the rule of law, and the Constitution itself. Some have even indicated an increasing acceptance of political violence to resolve differences. And against that background of declining trust in our governing institutions and the perceived failure of liberalism and constitutional government, some Americans are exploring and advocating various strains of “post-liberalism” that look back longingly on, among other things, the Catholic social thought of the nineteenth century. Thus, in something of a vicious and paradoxical loop, our increasing inability to engage in dialogue, upon which the Constitution rests, has warped the design of the Constitution and led more Americans to question the very legitimacy of the Constitution itself.

Meanwhile, more Catholics find themselves divided today than ever, simultaneously doubting the worth and integrity of the Catholic Church and its various leaders. Millions have left the Catholic Church in response to the traumas of the sex abuse scandal.¹⁵⁵ Many now look upon the Vatican as a distant and corrupt institution, bloated and out of touch with real people. Thus, just as some Americans have started to adopt the critique of America made by nineteenth-century Catholic social thought, some Catholics have started to adopt the critique of the Catholic Church made by late eighteenth-century Americans. To use a quip from Abraham Lincoln, after wrestling with each other for a couple centuries, Americans and Catholics have wrestled themselves

155. See, e.g., Daniel Hungerman, *Substitution and Stigma: Evidence on Religious Competition from the Catholic Sex-Abuse Scandal*, 5(3) AM. ECON. J.: ECON. POL'Y 227 (2013) (finding that the scandal led to a 2-million-member fall in the Catholic Church); Megan Trimble, *More Catholics Consider Leaving the Church Amid Abuse Scandal*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, (Mar. 13, 2019); Maggie Phillips, *Catholics Are in Crisis*, TABLET (Dec. 2, 2025).

into each other's clothing, each now doubting themselves as they used to doubt each other.

CONCLUSION: ADDRESSING THE "RERUM NOVARUM" OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The 250-year history of the dialogue between the Catholic Church and America, and Pope Leo's theological and philosophical reflections on dialogue, may have some constitutional significance for us today. For starters, it is fascinating to observe how the Catholic Church, the preeminent "pre-liberal" institution in an era of ascendant liberalism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has today become an important defender of liberalism in an increasingly "post-liberal" era in the early twenty first century.

Pope Leo's theology of dialogue—based in epistemic humility, analytical rigor, and charity or civic friendship—although obviously grounded in Christian faith, Scripture, and seasoned with Augustinian perspectives, has touchpoints with some of the highest, yet often overlooked, aspirations of America's original constitutional system. Perhaps one of the overlooked benefits of the first American pope, therefore, is his serendipitous (if perhaps unintended) ability to remind Americans of some of the overlooked ideals in their own constitutional history. A generation ago, Pope John Paul II noted the congruence between America's founding commitment to the ideals of liberty and equality with the Christian understanding of the human person as formed in the image of God. Similarly, Pope Leo XIV is today helping to point out the congruence between the "spirit of liberty" upon which America's Constitution depends and the Christian understanding of how to listen, think, and speak with their neighbors whom they are called to forgive and love.

One of the further advantages of Leo's theology and philosophy of dialogue is its ability to speak to the contemporary American constitutional and political moment where it needs it most. It is, in short, tough-minded where the contemporary American mind can be soft, and soft where the contemporary American mind has become hardened. Contrary to some for whom perfecting the ground rules of dialogue between warring parties, in a spirit of liberal *modus vivendi* proceduralism, is the only legitimate arrangement in a relativistic world where truth is fundamentally unknowable, Pope Leo begins his mediations on dialogue with the view that truth *is* knowable. And contrary to others who believe that they have the truth, indeed sometimes often anchored in the Catholic faith, and aim to impose it directly on the rest of society, using *ad hominem* attack, aggression, and force if necessary, fed up with the seemingly soulless ground rules of classical liberalism, Pope Leo argues that dialogue, as specifically understood in the Christian faith, *requires* listening, epistemic humility, and grace towards one's interlocutors.

Pope Leo's focus upon listening and dialogue may seem a small, humble, even pedestrian matter, a mere "mustard seed" in the grand scheme of all our complex, contemporary problems. But for Leo, it has deep spiritual significance. Opening oneself up to listening is for him the very first step in the soul's receptivity to the Gospel, conversion, and imitation of Christ. And, as it

happens, it is also the first step in breaking out of the self-imposed prison of one's own mind and entering into real communion with one's neighbor and connection with the broader, wider world.

But it may also be at the heart of solving some of today's most challenging constitutional problems. Dialogue—within institutions, across institutions, and across time—is at the heart of the American constitutional project. It is its precondition and lifeblood. And an increasing inability to engage in healthy dialogue across differences in the public sphere is not only making our politics more unpleasant. It is also the root cause of some of the systemic warping in our constitutional system. And it is paradoxically contributing to the decline of confidence in the Constitution itself and its animating ideals. The search for a “post-liberal” future in America thus seems to be the consequence of frustration with the underperformance of a system that was designed to run on listening, dialogue and compromise, but is fueled mostly on polarized and unreasoning contention. It is, perhaps, like getting rid of a car that won't run properly after giving it the wrong kind of fuel for too long.

The constitutional significance of the first American pope may be, perhaps somewhat ironically, to help remind Americans what kind of fuel our Constitution was originally designed to run on. It therefore may reside less in any direct and perhaps inevitable collisions between the papacy and American presidents over substantive policy choices, but rather in Pope Leo's attempt to address the manner or spirit in which people speak to each other and resolve their differences today. It may reside, to again speak in grammatical terms, less in the domain of nouns and verbs, presidents and policies, war and peace, and more in the sphere of adverbs, “the way we look at others, listen to others, and speak about others.”

Pope Leo is at once the fruit of the 250-year dialogue between the Catholic Church and America and also a theologian and philosopher of dialogue himself. Just as Pope Leo XIII addressed himself to what he called the “*Rerum Novarum*” of the late nineteenth century associated with industrialization, urbanization, and working conditions, Pope Leo XIV appears poised to confront the “*Rerum Novarum*” of the current moment—increased tribalism, social isolation, and mutual suspicion—within America, the Catholic Church, and the world itself. The challenge of Pope Leo XIV to inspire a “united church” in dialogue with itself and the world, and that will be a leaven for “reconciliation” and what he called “fraternal communion” now parallels the same exact challenge many Americans confront as they try to make sense of a political landscape riven with division, mutual contempt, and distrust. And just as Pope Leo XIV has found in the rich repository of the Catholic intellectual tradition resources for thinking afresh about unity, bridge-building, and harmony, it may fall to Americans to rediscover in America's own constitutional tradition sources equal to that task in the civic sphere to forge “*unum*” out of acrimonious “*pluribus*.” In that effort, there may be lessons to be drawn from Pope Leo's own theological and philosophical reflections upon dialogue, which in some ways rhyme with those very ideals, and the remarkable but relatively neglected centuries-long story of intellectual change, self-correction, and development

through dialogue and listening between his own home country and the church he now leads.