

OPINION

Leo XIV's election is a defeat for the 'Chinese party'

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Beyond the celebratory tones, it is clear that the election of Francis Robert Prevost to the papacy has caused not only surprise, but also a certain dismay and disappointment in the Western mainstream media/political/intellectual circles, which are always inclined

towards a hyper-secularised progressive "single narrative". This narrative predicted - based on the objective fact that the vast majority of the cardinals had been appointed by Pope Bergoglio himself - that the new Pope would 'naturally' be less the successor of Peter than the successor of Francis, continuing the 'renewal' while remaining faithful to his inspiration. In this sense, the names of Parolin, followed by Zuppi and Tagle, seemed the most likely candidates.

The choice of Prevost, his first symbolic gestures and his first subsequent pronouncements have cast more than a few doubts on this axiomatic account. We have seen how, from his appearance on the balcony of St Peter's Square, Leo XIV emphasised elements of clear discontinuity with the totally anti-formalist and 'sacrilegious' rhetoric of his predecessor: the restoration of solemn vestments, the centrality of the invocation of the Virgin, and his first sermon, which insisted on the centrality of Christ and his divine nature. But it is undeniable that the most "disturbing" element for many "ultra-Bergoglian" observers was first and foremost the fact that the new pontiff comes from the United States. And the annoyance this caused them was primarily of a specifically political nature. They were expecting an Asian pope or one from a largely secularised Europe, and instead, for the first time, they got a North American pope. This immediately set off alarm bells in the progressive mainstream about a possible connection between this novelty and the fact that the United States is currently governed by what they consider to be the devil incarnate, Donald Trump. The nationality of the new pontiff was immediately and subliminally linked in the minds of these observers to the infamous meme of the US president wearing a papal mitre, arousing uncomfortable and disturbing feelings.

Naturally, faced with this nagging doubt, the heralds of the 'single narrative' reacted immediately by hastily erecting a barrier. With a suspicious haste that conceals an obvious *excusatio non petita*, Prevost was immediately portrayed as 'the least American of the American cardinals', an anti-Trumpian, an unconditional defender of Latin American migrants and, ça va sans dire, a staunch supporter of Bergoglio. Indeed, many of the aforementioned heralds explained his surprise election by claiming that the conclave wanted to make an explicitly hostile gesture towards Trump, or at least send him a threatening warning: "We are electing a US pope, but one who is very different from you, to undermine your support, to give voice to the opposition in your country, and to make it clear that from now on you will always have an authoritative counterpoint, a thorn in your side right here at home".

But how realistic is this version of events? Very little, if you look at the raw

numbers and the political significance of what happened. The predominance of Prevost's name in the conclave was certainly the result of the convergence, at a certain point, of a large part of the 'bloc' of votes held by Secretary of State Piero Parolin, who was considered the candidate with the best chances of being elected and the most authoritative, albeit more cautious, continuation of the Bergoglian line of the pontificate. But this was a composite Italian-European-Asian 'bloc' that could not automatically be classified as Bergoglian and progressive. Above all, this convergence was greatly facilitated by the fact that the US cardinals, representing a rapidly growing Church that has hitherto counted for less than it represents, in turn formed a 'bloc' that remained united with the South American cardinals, thus establishing their representative as the most immediate alternative in the event that the consensus for Parolin did not grow to exceed the two-thirds threshold, which happened.

Thus, although Prevost is classified as a 'progressive', albeit a moderate one, he was elected not as a progressive or a Bergoglian, but precisely because he is an American. And there seems to be no doubt that he was also supported by the strong conservative/traditionalist majority that exists today in the Church in the United States, including charismatic figures such as Cardinal Timothy Dolan and even Pope Bergoglio's main opponent, Raymond Leo Burke.

In short, Leo XIV will not be a Trumpian (although apparently he is a registered Republican voter), but he is certainly the expression of the protagonism now assumed by the American component of Catholicism as a whole and its open claim to leadership. And, secondly, of the entire American continent. On the other hand, it is particularly significant that Catholics are now the largest religious denomination in the United States, that their votes were decisive in Trump's second election, and that influential members of his administration, such as Vice President Pence and Secretary of State Rubio, are Catholics.

And this brings us to another important aspect of this election, which has been completely ignored by the progressive 'unified narrative' and perhaps even by the reactions of the more conservative circles of Catholicism, which are perhaps too intent on understanding whether or not there is an 'ideological', doctrinal and pastoral discontinuity between Leo and Francis. In fact, almost no one has noticed what seems to be a decisive aspect: the election of Prevost, and the failure to elect Parolin, Luiz Antonio Tagle or any other similar candidate, also represents a very clear defeat for the "Chinese party" in the Church, that is, for that part of the episcopate and the College of Cardinals that has sought a preferential relationship with the Beijing regime. In Italy, this party is

represented, among others, by the Community of Sant'Egidio, which has gained enormous influence during the pontificate of Francis. The decisive expression of this relationship was, of course, the famous, or infamous, secret agreement of 2018, which gave rise to much debate. It was probably the fact that Parolin was the person most responsible for this line that constituted the decisive handicap, the stain that prevented him from ascending to the papal throne. And even more so, it prevented the election of candidates such as Tagle and Matteo Zuppi.

The election of Leo XIV was also, by all appearances, a very decisive halt to the policy of appeasement towards the Chinese regime and a clear repositioning of the Catholic Church in the Western camp. It is not a 'Trumpisation' of Catholicism, but it is certainly another piece in the increasingly tense global confrontation between Washington and Beijing. One that definitely scores a point in Washington's favour.