

CHURCH

Pope Leo XIV 'caresses' French traditionalists

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French Catholicism is currently experiencing an unexpected resurgence, as evidenced by the data on adult baptisms last Easter. In 2023, there were 5,463 baptisms; this figure increased by 30% the following year, reaching 7,135. Recently, Dutch Cardinal Willem Jacobus Eijk did spoke of a 'rebirth' of the faith. This revival is mainly being driven by the faithful and traditionalist communities, who are often dismissed as “traditionalists”.

During Francis's years in office, this situation was viewed with suspicion, leading to the closure of religious institutions or the retirement of bishops who were too favourable to these realities. Leo XIV, on the other hand, seems to want to take a different approach to hard-core transalpine Catholicism.

This is evident in the tone and content of the letter sent yesterday to the French bishops to mark the 100th anniversary of the canonisation of St John Eudes, St John Mary Vianney, and St Thérèse of the Child Jesus. The latter is particularly dear to traditionalist Catholics, who have not forgotten that it was the anti-modernist Pope St Pius X who called her 'the greatest saint of modern times'.

In his letter to the bishops, Leo wrote that he hoped that these celebrations would not merely evoke nostalgia for a bygone era, but would reawaken hope and inspire a new missionary zeal. God can, with the help of the saints he has given you and whom you celebrate, renew the wonders he has worked in the past”.

These words demonstrate the balance of thought and action of the new Pope, who is not ideologically opposed to those whom his predecessor labelled 'backward-looking'.

Prevost also wrote that the three saints would speak to the consciences of many young people, showing them the beauty, greatness and fruitfulness of the priesthood and inspiring them to respond generously to the call. This is particularly important at a time when the lack of vocations is severely felt in dioceses and priests are under increasing pressure.

These words were received with great enthusiasm by traditional communities, who had suffered harsh treatment under the previous pontificate. In recent years, institutes and dioceses that have bucked the national trend by experiencing an increase in vocations have frequently been subject to apostolic visits that have recommended 'better discernment and a certain prudence in entering formation'.

In other words, doors were closed to seminarians who showed liturgical and ecclesial sensitivity linked to tradition, and who were often the only ones in several

dioceses.

By extolling the virtues of the priesthood rather than its defects, Leo XIV has shown favour to the so-called 'traditionalists', who are growing in number in France. This is the second time they have been recognised, following the appointment of their cardinal of reference, the French-speaking Guinean Robert Sarah, as special envoy for the liturgical celebrations at the shrine of Sainte-Anne-d'Auray to mark the 400th anniversary of the apparitions of Saint Anne to the Breton peasant Yvon Nicolazic on 25-26 July.