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On May 8, 2025, the world's 1.4 billion Catholics were doubly surprised by the rapid election of a new pope (on the conclave's second day) and the election of the first American pope. I was at work in the research center of the Historic New Orleans Collection when the news began to buzz that a pope had been elected. Upon the announcement of Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost as Pope Leo XIV, my first thought was “Who is this American whom so few Americans seem to know?” That was the question that led me to explore the biographical details and family history of our new Holy Father. You can imagine my surprise and joy when after first perusing Pope Leo's father's French and Sicilian immigrant roots, I turned to his mother's family only to discover that they were Creoles of color deeply rooted in my hometown of New Orleans, and in fact only left New Orleans in the second decade of the 20th century. They carried familiar names like Martinez, Baquié, Lemelle, Ramos, and Maxent. The joy was bittersweet because like so many branches of Black American families, the Pope's maternal family migrated out of the South, leaving behind not only their ancestral homeland but also identification as people of color - as we call the phenomenon, they “passed” for white. My mind immediately went to the well-known Healy family, the children of an Irish planter and an enslaved woman, who in the 19th century gifted the Church with so many vocations, but all while actively distancing themselves from their Black identities.

I shared my initial findings online thinking that it would interest my many friends in the history and genealogy world and those who are actively preserving the heritage of families like Pope Leo's and mine, who are Louisiana Creoles. I was wrong! People all over the world have shown interest in the Pope's ancestry, which includes people from Louisiana, Martinique, Haiti, France, Acadie, Cuba, and even Romani who settled in Louisiana in the early 18th century. Each of these family lines intertwined with African-descended people who were enslaved or free people of color. As recently as the 1810s and 1820s, the Successor of St. Peter had family members who were enslaved. When we think about the adversities that Catholics of color experienced in the 19th and early 20th centuries just to participate in the Church and moreover to pursue religious vocations, it is incredible that in a winding path known only to God, the great-great-great-grandson of enslaved Catholics is now the Pope. It reminds us of Psalms 118:22-23: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. By the Lord has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes.” As a resident of the most vibrant Black Catholic community in the country, an active member of the Knights of Peter Claver, and a person with free and enslaved Black Catholic ancestry for more than 200 years, I couldn't be more proud that Pope Leo's heritage of faith emanates from our community.