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TOP STORY

Ojai priest gifts pope with Villanova Prep cap

The Very Rev. Barnaby Johns helps celebrate Pope Leo's birthday

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Photo provided 

Pope Leo XIV receives a Villanova Preparatory School baseball cap and birthday card from students and staff of Villanova, presented by Father Barnaby Johns. Father Joseph Farrel, the new prior general of the Augustinian Order, is at left.

After spending three weeks in September in Rome, Villanova Preparatory School's Very Rev. Barnaby Johns brings back messages of bridge building, humility and unity, inspired by Pope Leo XIV.

"The pope always seems to be in another realm or dimension," said Johns, of the Catholic Order of St. Augustine. Johns serves as prior provincial of the Province of St. Augustine in California, which owns Villanova Preparatory School in Ojai.

He traveled to Rome from Sept. 1 to 20 for the election of the leader of the Order of St. Augustine, which also offered an opportunity to have an audience with Pope Leo XIV, who is a member of the Order.

Johns said, "We elected a new prior general, Father Joseph Farrell, who — like Pope Leo — is from North America and is familiar with Ojai and Villanova Prep."

'The popes we need'

Johns said: "I've known him for 20 years. It is so extraordinary to have that level of familiarity with the Holy Father, the pope, the successor of St. Peter."



Photo provided

Pope Leo XIV greets Father Barnaby Johns, right, in Rome on Sept. 1, with Father Alejandro Moral Anton.

Robert Francis Prevost, 70, now Pope Leo XIV, who was selected last year to serve as pope, is originally from Chicago. He is the first American and first Augustinian friar to be named pontiff, the 267th bishop of Rome, and Holy Father of the Catholic Church. Johns has known Prevost for 20 years and said Pope Leo XIV has visited Ojai during trips to Villanova Preparatory School.

The three-week event in September began just after Pope Leo celebrated his 70th birthday.

“We sang him ‘Happy Birthday,’” said Johns. Roughly 80 members of the Order lined up to give birthday greetings to Pope Leo. Johns presented him with a Villanova baseball cap and a handwritten card from students and staff.

“It was a well-thought-out act of love from the students,” said Johns about the card. Then Johns presented the pope with the baseball cap.

“He has received a few baseball caps” and sometimes tries them on, said Johns.

Johns said he asked Pope Leo if he would put on the cap. “He said, ‘Nope.’”

Chuckling, Johns said, “I think he’s had enough” of trying on baseball caps.

Later, the pope took questions from members of the Order.

Johns said Pope Leo’s responses to questions were very “careful, reasonable.”

He said the pope showed “deep thinking” on the questions posed, “as he finds his feet in this position.”

Johns said the pope was asked, “What’s it like to be the pope?”

Johns said Pope Leo responded with levity, “Next question.”

Johns said the pope did answer, saying that the position comes with “great challenges and great joys.”

Johns reflected about the “weight on his shoulders” Pope Leo must experience stepping into the symbolic and influential role. “I can only imagine what it must be like for him.”

Johns said lining up and being able to greet and shake his hand “was very natural, and very surreal for the level of familiarity, it’s very special.” He said typically there “is 7 degrees of separation from the pope. Now, I email him, not often, because I know he’s very busy.”

“I’ve known Pope Leo for a long time, and it was impactful to see him in this context serving as a pastor and shepherd to his people, delivering messages deeply rooted in the same Augustinian values we teach at Villanova Prep — one’s profound relationship with a restless heart and a firm sense of hope that exists

within the education of unity, truth and love,” said Johns.

Pope Leo gave the opening homily at the Order’s event. Johns said three major parts of the message, which are woven into the lives of all Augustinians, are “humility, unity and to listen.”

Considering global events and the influence of the Catholic Church and the role of the pope, Johns said he thinks Pope Leo is adopting the values of “a listening heart, profound humility” and will, as pope, “bring those values right to the issues of politics, international strife, immigration. How incredible could that be?”

Johns said: “It reminded me that we are given the popes we need at the particular time they’re needed. I pray that Pope Leo will continue to be a great gift to the church and help us navigate some very challenging times in the world.”

Our restless hearts

Johns said “a key motif in the Augustinian Order” and one that is taught in all Augustinian schools, including Villanova, is that through “all our lives, Augustinians recognize that we have a form of disquiet, some call it an anxiety, in the heart, in the deeper depth of who we are as a human being.” He said part of our lives as humans is “seeking a quiet, a peace, an inner peace. ... There is a beginning and end. Birth and resurrection.”

Johns said that St. Augustine’s writings posited that “there is a God-shaped hole in your heart, and that through our seeking in our life’s journey, and reflecting on the good of our brothers, of the Order, the church, of the world,” that hole can be filled.

“How do we find, in our lives, the rest that we seek?”

He said: “There is a goodness in the restlessness. It calls us to form a deeper relationship with God.”

Red Mass

Johns is reflecting on his time in Rome as he prepares to give the homily at the 43rd annual Red Mass at 5:30 p.m. on Oct. 14 at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. Hosted by the St. Thomas More Society, the Red Mass opens the judicial year, and members of the legal profession are invited to attend. The event will be in person and be streamed online.

Justice Martin J. Jenkins, associate justice on the California Supreme Court, will serve as the closing speaker.

According to the St. Thomas More Society website, the Red Mass was “first celebrated in Paris in 1245. The Red Mass is an annual tradition at the opening of the Judicial Year, in line with that of the U.S. Supreme Court each October. Judges and lawyers attend, joined by public officials and law faculty members.”

The event is described as an "ecumenical, civic celebration widely attended by judges, lawyers and officials of all faiths so as to invoke God's blessing and guidance in the administration of justice," by the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels.

Johns was invited to be a guest preacher during the Mass.

In writing his sermon, Johns said he thought of the Roman title the pope holds of “Pontifex Maximus.”

“It means Bridge Builder. We are living in a very politicized world. The idea of reconciliation gets to the very heart” of the Order’s message. He said he wants to bring forward the theme of bridge-building “with peace, truth, love, unity.”

Johns said, “Instead of building walls in our heart, build bridges.”

More information about the Red Mass is online at stmsla.org

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Reporter