

Here, our editors (from America – Jesuit Review) share what struck them in a first reading of “Dilexi Te.”

## Jesus who became poor

....., it spends the second of its five chapters tracing its theme through the witness of Scripture, before turning in the third chapter to follow the same thread through the patristic tradition and the history of religious charisms.

In particular, “Dilexi Te” argues that *“God’s preferential love for the poor,”* seen throughout the Old Testament, “comes to fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth,” through his becoming poor for our sake in the Incarnation (No. 18). Pope Leo describes Jesus as experiencing both the material dimensions of poverty, being born in humble surroundings and earning his living by manual labour and also its existential dimensions, encountering *“the same exclusion that is the lot of the poor, the outcast of society”* (No. 19).

The exhortation also unpacks Jesus’ teaching in the great commandment, linking love of God inseparably with love of the poor and then linking both to love of Jesus, as expressed in the parable of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46). The early Christian community understood this, the pope says, committing themselves to a sharing of resources and acts of charity “directly following Jesus’ example as presented in the Gospel” (No. 29). Leo underlines this identity between the Incarnation and love for the poor again near the end of the exhortation, writing: “For Christians, the poor are not a sociological category, but the very ‘flesh’ of Christ. It is not enough to profess the doctrine of God’s Incarnation in general terms. To enter truly into this great mystery, we need to understand clearly that the Lord took on a flesh that hungers and thirsts, and experiences infirmity and imprisonment” (No. 110). — Sam Sawyer, S.J.

## Francis and Vatican II

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a document begun by Pope Leo’s predecessor, “Dilexit Te” shows a striking continuity with the writings of Pope Francis. The Second Vatican Council is also everywhere to be found. The two influences obviously go together, as Pope Francis clearly considered [the implementation of Vatican II](#) to be a primary focus of his papacy. That Pope Leo hewed so close to Francis’ vision suggests an ongoing commitment to the council that he first made clear in [his address to the College of Cardinals after his election](#).

When Pope John XXIII announced Vatican II, the future Pope Leo was 3 years old. His experience of the council is through the lens of the church’s tradition—and Francis is now a significant part of that tradition. He is quoted or cited dozens of times in “Dilexit Te” on everything from ecclesiology to poverty to Christology to ecology to care for prisoners and more.

Leo calls Vatican II *“a milestone in the church’s understanding of the poor”* (No. 84) and cites [“Gaudium et Spes”](#) as foundational in the church’s understanding of the universal destination of goods and the social function of property, even quoting a line from G.S. that might make any capitalist nervous: “Persons in extreme necessity are entitled to take what they need from the riches of others” (No. 86).

Note, too, the day on which Leo signed this document: Oct. 4, the Feast of St. Francis. — James T. Keane

## Rethinking poverty

Pope Leo’s “Dilexi Te” comes at a uniquely precarious time for the world’s poor, as the United States and European nations have significantly cut [anti-poverty and humanitarian aid](#) to developing nations, even as they have added extravagantly to defense budgets.

“Dilexi Te” asks its readers to expand their understanding of what poverty entails.

*“We should perhaps speak more correctly of the many faces of the poor and of poverty, since it is a multifaceted phenomenon,”* Pope Leo writes. It involves material lack, like food, water and shelter. But Pope Leo also reminds us that “we are witnessing an increase in different kinds of poverty, which is no longer a single, uniform reality but now involves



multiple forms of economic and social impoverishment, reflecting the spread of inequality even in largely affluent contexts” (No 12).

Pope Leo XIV shares a moment with guests assisted by the Albano diocesan Caritas agency during a luncheon at the Borgo Laudato Si’ in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Aug. 17, 2025. Credit: CNS photo/Lola Gomez

The world’s marginalized and vulnerable can be found among those trapped in poverty in their nations of birth. They can also be found among the many millions displaced as migrants and refugees who seek a better life somewhere else, even as wealthy nations close their doors (No. 75).

Pope Leo takes aim at a few different ideological distortions with regard to addressing poverty. One group, who might say that we have made great progress in alleviating poverty, is rebutted: *“The claim that the modern world has reduced poverty is made by measuring poverty with criteria from the past that do not correspond to present-day realities.”* Likewise, those, especially in the church, who look at the poor as victims of their own choices, or a necessary constituent of our economic system, are victims of *“that specious view of meritocracy that sees only the successful as ‘deserving’”* (No. 14).

Though she was not cited in this document, one cannot help but think of a quote that was apocryphally attributed to Dorothy Day: *“The Gospel takes away our right forever, to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor.”* — Kevin Clarke and Zac Davis

### **Latin American influence**

In 2023, Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the papal nuncio to the United States, caused a stir when he [expressed his surprise](#) that the U.S. bishops were, in general, not well versed in the history of the church in Latin America and its influence on Pope Francis. After reading “Dilexi Te,” it is clear that Pope Leo—an American who spent much of his ministry in Peru—knows this history well.

In a document chock-full of citations from previous popes, it is notable that Pope Leo also chooses to cite the work of the episcopal conferences in Latin America, notably at [Medellín](#) and [Aparecida](#). *“For my part, having served as a missionary in Peru for many years, I am greatly indebted to this process of ecclesial discernment,”* Pope Leo writes.

In Latin America, the bishops called for the church to “not only share the condition of the poor, but also stand at their side and work actively for their integral development.” That meant not just feeding the poor but examining the systems of injustice that make people poor in the first place. This is perhaps the most challenging section of “Dilexi Te.” It is not enough to just donate to your local food pantry. We need to examine the “social sin” that leads to poverty, and examine our culpability. — Tim Reidy

### **Love of the poor and worship of God**

In several parts of the exhortation, Leo touches on the connection between the church’s love of the poor and proper worship. The two cannot be separated, according to Leo, nor can one be seen in any calculative sense as preeminent, over or against the other: *“Jesus’ teaching on the primacy of love for God is clearly complemented by his insistence that one cannot love God without extending one’s love to the poor”* (No. 26).

He is not addressing a new problem in the Christian community. Leo quotes the Old and New Testaments along with the early church Fathers who called out their community’s tendency to prioritize beautiful worship while ignoring the poor and marginalized. In one particularly strong section, Leo, recalling the witness of St. John Chrysostom, concludes that *“if the faithful do not encounter Christ in the poor who stand at the door, they will not be able to worship him even at the altar.”* Consequently, he writes, “charity is not optional but a requirement of true worship” (No. 41).

Leo shows that Jesus’ entire life—from the moment of his birth, his occupation and social status, his ministry and preaching, and ultimately his being rejected and executed—was marked by poverty. Loving Jesus, in a sense, means grappling with the inseparable relationship between God and poverty.

But it’s not just a matter of serving the poor because Jesus was poor. The integration of worship and love for the poor culminates in asking the question: What is proper worship? Worship, he says, has the task of transforming us, so that we become living images of Christ, and freeing us “from the risk of living our relationships according to a logic of calculation and self-interest” (No. 27). In this sense, love for the poor purifies our worship, which increases our love for the poor. — Sebastian Gomes

**[\[Pope Leo in first major document: Love for the poor is not optional for Christians\]](#)**