Opinion

NCR Voices



Pope Leo XIV signs his first apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te* ("I Have Loved You"), in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Oct. 4, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, as Archbishop Edgar Peña Parra, the substitute secretary for general affairs at the Vatican Secretariat of State, looks on. The exhortation was released Oct. 9. (OSV News/Reuters/Vatican Media)



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It is odd — or is it? — that Pope Leo begins his apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te* with the story of the woman who poured costly oil on Jesus' head (Matthew 26:8-9,11), only to be upbraided by one of the disciples who fretted, "Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor."

Jesus' reply is often seen as an excuse for indifference to the clamant needs of the poor: "You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me," before asserting that as long as the Gospel is proclaimed, this woman's kindness to him will be told. Pope Leo draws an important conclusion: "No sign of affection, even the smallest, will ever be forgotten, especially if it is shown to those who are suffering, lonely or in need, as was the Lord at that time" (#4). Attending to the poor is not only about money. It is about affection. The Gospel call is no mere noblesse oblige; the call is to solidarity.



Copies of the Italian translation of *Dilexi Te* ("I Have Loved You"), Pope Leo XIV's apostolic exhortation, are seen in front of Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, prefect of the Dicastery for the Service of Charity, at a Vatican news conference Oct. 9, 2025.

(CNS/Pablo Esparza)

A theme that runs through the text is also articulated here, at the beginning: Leo points out that Jesus not only told the apostles that the poor would be with them always, but that he himself would always be with them (Matthew 28:20). "Love for the Lord, then, is one with love for the poor," the pope writes (#5). A few paragraphs later, recalling God speaking to Moses in the burning bush, telling him that he has heard the cry of his people Israel, Leo continues the theme: "In hearing the cry of the poor, we are asked to enter into the heart of God, who is always concerned for the needs of his children, especially those in greatest need" (#8).

Concern for the poor demands more than any individual response, although it also requires that. "A concrete commitment to the poor must also be accompanied by a change in mentality that can have an impact at the cultural level," the pope writes. "In fact, the illusion of happiness derived from a comfortable life pushes many people towards a vision of life centered on the accumulation of wealth and social success at all costs, even at the expense of others and by taking advantage of unjust social ideals and political-economic systems that favor the strongest" (#11).



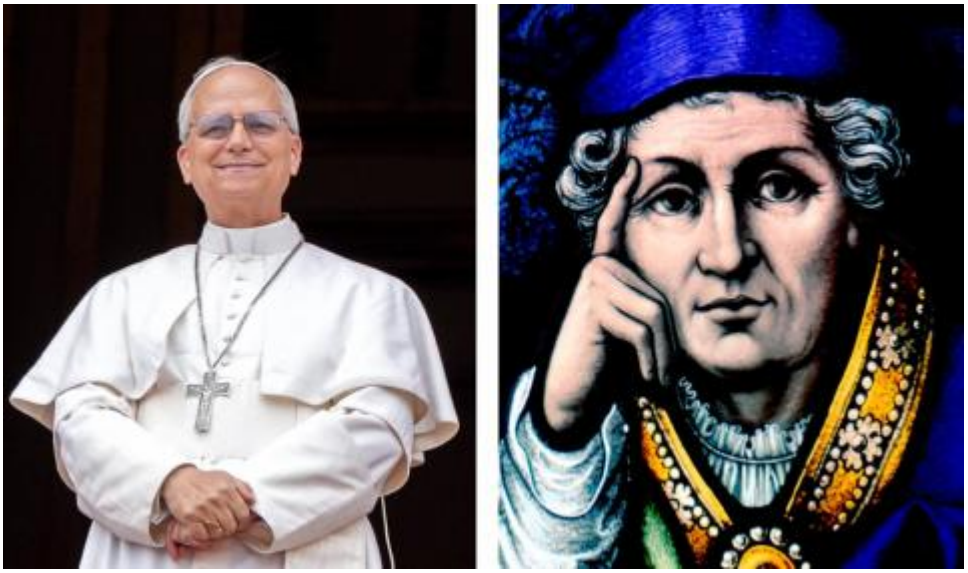
A person asks for alms near St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican Oct. 8, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Like his predecessors, Leo displays an appropriate hostility to any variety of social Darwinism. "The poor are not there by chance or by blind and cruel fate. Nor, for most of them, is poverty a choice. Yet, there are those who still presume to make this claim, thus revealing their own blindness and cruelty," he writes. (#14) And, this: "Nor can it be said that most of the poor are such because they do not 'deserve' otherwise, as maintained by that specious view of meritocracy that sees only the successful as 'deserving'" (#14). These are strong words — blind, cruel, specious — but they are spot-on.

Leo continues one of the principal hallmarks of Catholic social teaching in the post-conciliar era, especially in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. For all three, there is a clear emphasis on the anthropological and dogmatic roots of our social teaching. This is not mere ethics. The ethics flow from the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

> God is merciful love, and his plan of love, which unfolds and is fulfilled in history, is above all his descent and coming among us to free us from slavery, fear, sin and the power of death. Addressing their human condition with a merciful gaze and a heart full of love, he turned to his creatures and thus took care of their poverty. Precisely in order to share the limitations and fragility of our human nature, he himself became poor and was born in the flesh like us. We came to know him in the smallness of a child laid in a manger and in the extreme humiliation of the cross, where he shared our radical poverty, which is death (#16).

The phrase "he turned to his creatures and this took care of their poverty" is the kind of astounding claim that one finds in the Church Fathers, but not so much in 21st century Catholic ethics. Paragraphs 16-23 develop these pre-ethical themes.



This is a combination of Pope Leo XIV looking out to the crowd from the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican as he leads the midday recitation of the "Regina Coeli" prayer for the first time May 11, 2025, and St. Augustine of Hippo depicted in this stained-glass art in Winnipeg, Manitoba. (OSV News/CNS/Lola Gomez/Crosiers)

Leo relates our concern for the poor to the liturgy: "For this reason, works of mercy are recommended as a sign of the authenticity of worship, which, while giving praise to God, has the task of opening us to the transformation that the Spirit can bring about in us, so that we may all become an image of Christ and his mercy towards the weakest," he writes. "In this sense, our relationship with the Lord, expressed in worship, also aims to free us from the risk of living our relationships according to a logic of calculation and self-interest" (#27). There is a keen psychological insight here too: We need to be freed from calculation and self-interest. They are chains, a form of enslavement inconsistent with the Gospel.

Chapter 3, paragraphs 35-81, traces the history of this ecclesial fixation on the poor, from the writings of St. Paul through the work of St. Katharine Drexel. Unsurprisingly, our Augustinian pope spends several paragraphs considering the "Christocentric and deeply ecclesial perspective" of St. Augustine, writing: "For Augustine, the poor are not just people to be helped, but the sacramental presence of the Lord" (#44). This is the longest chapter in the exhortation and it shows how anyone claiming the mantle of "traditional Catholicism" must be distinguished by their concern for the poor.

Chapter 4, paragraphs 82-102, provide a summary of magisterial social teachings in the past 150 years, starting with the pope's namesake, Leo XIII, whose seminal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* applied the ancient teachings of the church to the modern circumstances of industrial society. Leo XIII focused especially on the vast inequality of wealth and the desperate situation of the urban poor in the late 19th century. I was disappointed that the Holy Father neglected to cite Pope Pius XI's marvelous 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* but delighted he cited the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1984 "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" which he charitably refers to as "a document that was not initially well received by everyone" (#98).

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Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical "Rerum Novarum" advocated for just working conditions, the rights of workers to bargain collectively and form unions, and to earn a living wage. (CNS/Library of Congress)

Pope Leo echoes his predecessor's condemnation of "the dictatorship of an economy that kills" and admonishes us all not to accept excuses maintaining unjust economic policies. "There is no shortage of theories attempting to justify the present state of affairs or to explain that economic thinking requires us to wait for invisible market forces to resolve everything," he writes. "Nevertheless, the dignity of every human person must be respected today, not tomorrow, and the extreme poverty of all those to whom this dignity is denied should constantly weigh upon our consciences" (#92).

Leo challenges again the meritocratic and free market theories that are used to justify the extreme inequalities of our day. "The same questions keep coming back to us. Does this mean that the less gifted are not human beings?" he asks. "Or that the weak do not have the same dignity as ourselves? Are those born with fewer opportunities of lesser value as human beings? Should they limit themselves merely to surviving? The worth of our societies, and our own future, depends on the answers we give to these questions. Either we regain our moral and spiritual dignity or we fall into a cesspool" (#95).

The final chapter focuses on the need to carry on this tradition of care for the poor, not only as a charitable act towards them, but as an understanding of the very nature of evangelization. If it can be said that a Christian should and must attend to the material needs of the poor, it is also clear that the Christian requires the poor to

inform his or her spiritual needs. "While it is true that the rich care for the poor, the opposite is no less true," Leo states. "This is a remarkable fact confirmed by the entire Christian tradition. Lives can actually be turned around by the realization that the poor have much to teach us about the Gospel and its demands. By their silent witness, they make us confront the precariousness of our existence" (#109). Let us hope that sentence deflates any Christian apologetics for the "Abundance" agenda put forward by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson!

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One of the most telling subjects Leo introduces is the ongoing value of almsgiving, which the pope admits "nowadays is not looked upon favorably even among believers" (#115). He nonetheless defends almsgiving and does so precisely by pointing beyond the merely ethical to the realm of Christian anthropology: "Those inspired by true charity know full well that almsgiving does not absolve the competent authorities of their responsibilities, eliminate the duty of government institutions to care for the poor, or detract from rightful efforts to ensure justice. Almsgiving at least offers us a chance to halt before the poor, to look into their eyes, to touch them and to share something of ourselves with them. In any event, almsgiving, however modest, brings a touch of *pietas* into a society otherwise marked by the frenetic pursuit of personal gain" (#116). Leo likes traditional devotions and that is a good thing.

One of the questions many of us had before the publication of this text was whether or not Leo would, following his namesake, reintroduce more natural law reasoning. Since the Second Vatican Council, social teaching has mostly been rooted in exegesis of the Scriptures, not natural law. I confess I have read the text hurriedly, and may have missed it, but I did not see any reference to natural law anywhere in this text.

A person asks for alms near St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican Oct. 8, 2025. (CNS photo/Lola G

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We do not know how much of this document was prepared before Pope Francis died. It is impossible to say "that paragraph was from Francis" or "clearly Leo penned that

sentence." In the area of social teaching, there has been comprehensive continuity from one pope to the next, as witnessed by the footnotes in the current document. Leo cites St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI multiple times, as he does Francis and St. Paul VI.

What does shine through is Leo's manner of encouraging people. We saw this first in his May 24 address to the Roman Curia. It can be fairly said that Francis often chastised the curia, but Leo was self-deprecating: "Popes pass, the Curia remains." Leo's voice is more pastoral than prophetic, more encouraging than bracing.

We should note also that this is the second time a new pope has issued a document that had been begun by his predecessor. In June, 2013, Pope Francis issued *Lumen Fidei*, an encyclical he said was written "with four hands;" Pope Benedict had finished a first draft to which Francis added observations of his own. I am not sure this is good practice. There will come a time when a new pope will be elected precisely to chart a new and different course: Should his first document be something his predecessor had largely undertaken?



Pope Francis talks with retired Pope Benedict XVI at the papal summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, March 23, 2013. (OSV News/Reuters/Vatican Media)

Leo, however, was not elected to chart a new course but to continue the reforms Francis had begun. We see this clearly in the new exhortation when Leo writes that the "analysis of Christian revelation in the context of modern social, labor, economic and cultural issues would not have been possible without the contribution of the laity, men and women alike, who grappled with the great issues of their time. At their side were those men and women religious who embodied a Church forging ahead in new directions. The epochal change we are now undergoing makes even more necessary a constant interaction between the faithful and the Church's magisterium, between ordinary citizens and experts, between individuals and institutions." (#82)

On balance, this new document is an excellent summation of Catholic social teaching about the poor, reflecting the important Christocentric approach of the postconciliar magisterium. There is a happy suspicion of what passes for urbane certainties in the ambient culture and a happy reverence for old traditions like almsgiving. There is much to challenge all of us, but nothing any Catholic should find objectionable, still less offensive. It should not provoke the kind of rebuttal so many of Francis' statements did but, as we saw in the Durbin controversy last week, Leo remains committed to the pastoral approach sketched by Francis. If he is attacked on the basis of this new document, then the schismatic tendencies that emerged in recent years cannot be arrested. Let's hope, on the contrary, that all Catholics find in this new document a reason to admire and love our new pope and embrace his encouragement and his teaching.

This story appears in the **Dilexi Te** feature series. View the full series.