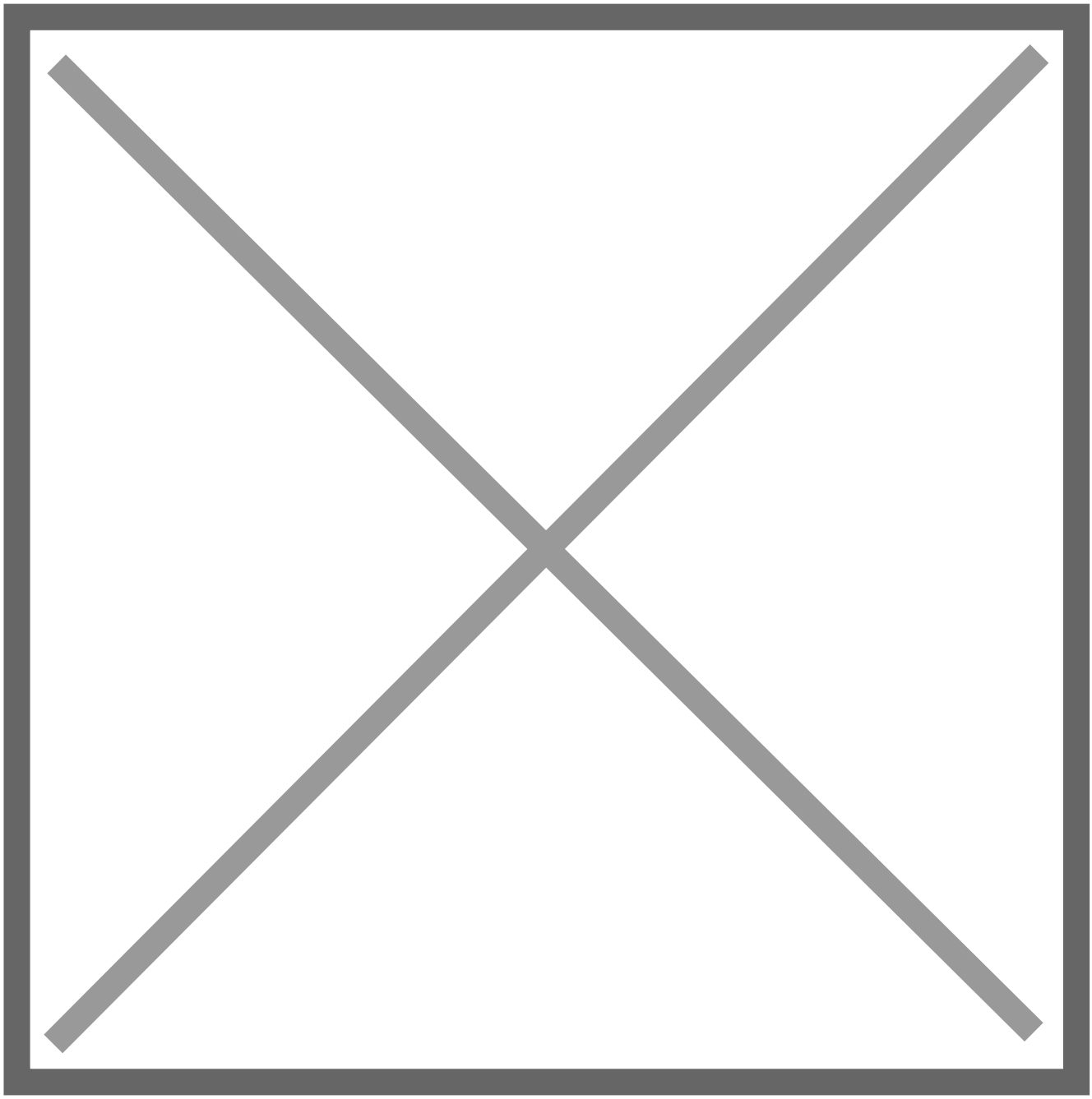
News
Analysis



A woman burns wood on the street to cook a meal for her husband and their daughter outside their home in São Paulo Sept. 16, 2022. (OSV News/Reuters/Amanda Perobelli)



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The words of Dilexi Te ("I Have Loved You") — the apostolic exhortation on love for the poor released by the Vatican Oct. 9 — come from the pen of two pontiffs, Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV.

With his April 21 death, Francis never completed the missive, but Leo — stating he is "happy to make this document my own" by "adding some reflections" — has now finished the task.

Students of papal pronouncements may discern and debate how much of Francis remains and how much Leo added to the text — but there's no philosophical departure. After only three paragraphs, Leo informed readers he shares the late pope's desire "that all Christians come to appreciate the close connection between Christ's love and his summons to care for the poor."

Nor, Leo says, is it optional: "I too consider it essential to insist on this path to holiness."

Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, encouraged Catholics to engage with the document's reflection on Christ's protecting love for the poor and the weak, and let it transform their lives.

"The Holy Father reminds us of a simple, life-changing truth, 'love for our neighbor is tangible proof of the authenticity of our love for God,'" said Broglio, who also leads the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services. "This means that 'charity is not optional but a requirement of true worship.'"

If concern for the poor is a critical element of Christianity, what role has the church had, and does it still have, in a world of growing inequality — especially in Leo's home country of the United States, which has wider disparities of wealth between rich and poor than any other major developed nation? What does Leo emphasize in Dilexi Te, and what do those who both serve the poor and study poverty think of it?

"The apostolic exhortation puts forth the pope's strategic plan for the rolling out of his pontificate," Archbishop Thomas GWenski of Miami told OSV News. "And in that strategic plan, the role of the church's advocacy for an accompaniment with the poor, the marginalized, the forgotten, is going to continue to be emphasized — as it was during Pope Francis' pontificate; as it has been throughout the history of the church — that faith without works is dead."

"He's calling us to recommit ourselves to work with the poor," Wenski said, "and to work with the poor in ways that are more than just throwing a few dollars in the collection basket for a second collection; but to be engaged with the poor and walking with them, while at the same time helping and empowering them to reclaim their dignity as human beings."

Observing that some ideas have become flashpoints in the church, Wenski suggested Leo appears to be "trying to rehabilitate the phrase 'social justice' — which in recent years has almost become in some circles a bad word, because of this association with certain ideological tendencies."

"But," he said, "the pope is trying to reclaim it, and place it within the constant social teachings of the church — that we have to not only help the individual poor person, but help create the conditions that will help the poor person overcome the burdens of the structural sins that sometimes contribute to their poverty."

Structural sin is a Catholic theological concept describing how sinful actions and attitudes become embedded in the structures of society, creating both harm and injustice.

Wenski noted the document also contradicts the meritocratic pop theology purveyed by televangelists.

"This is a rejection of what is sometimes called the 'prosperity Gospel,' that holds wealth and prosperity are signs of God's favor — and that poverty is a sign of God's disfavor, or somehow reflects the fault of the poor person himself," he said.

Asked if — as the first American pope — Leo's exhortation might be relative to the platforms of America's warring political parties, Wenski was doubtful.

"Some might try to hijack this exhortation to make it a defense of one political party's priorities or direction. I think that would be a mistake — because I think the purpose of it is beyond that. He doesn't go into policy prescriptions, but underscores principles," stressed Wenski.

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"People on both sides of the ideological spectrum say they want to help the poor — or we would hope they say that. If they do want to help the poor, they'll find in this — whether they're on the right or the left — inspiration for doing so. Some might take umbrage at some of the words," he added, "and that probably is a call or a deeper examination of conscience."

Wenski — who spent 18 years of his priesthood working with Haiti's "boat people" in Miami and has been an outspoken critic of Florida's "Alligator Alcatraz" immigrant detention camp — also responded to the exhortation's assertion that the Catholic Church doesn't regard migrants as a threat.

"People are not problems. They're human beings, flesh and blood human beings," he said. "Immigration might be a problem, but the people themselves are not problems — and we have to acknowledge their humanity, and seek to affirm it."

James Sullivan, a professor of economics at the University of Notre Dame and co-founder and director of its Lab for Economic Opportunities, a center researching

effective solutions to reduce poverty in America, agreed the exhortation emphasizes the indispensable role of care for the poor in the life of the faithful.

"It addresses a lot of concerns about what it means to prioritize those living in poverty," Sullivan told OSV News. "He's calling us all — it's fundamentally part of who we are as Christians. This isn't something that is an idle fancy of those who prioritize social justice. This is all of us, as Christians, are called to love the poor in the same way that they love God."

A Pew Research Center poll released in June indicated that 47% of U.S. Catholics regard "working with the poor and needy" as essential to what being Catholic means to them. It ranked just behind a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (69%) and devotion to the Virgin Mary (50%), but ahead of receiving the Eucharist (46%).

"He emphasizes that this comes straight from the Gospels," Sullivan added. "This is not a new opinion of a papacy. This is something that's core to who we are as Christians."

Sullivan also took note of Leo's critique of social disparities.

"He is clear that when we have inequities in power — and then people use that power to enrich themselves — that's injustice, and we are called to act against that. And that should cut across political ideologies," he said.

John Berry — national president of the Society of St. Vincent DePaul USA, which provides more than $1.7 billion in aid to more than 5 million people every year through person-to-person services, food pantries, disaster response and more — noted the exhortation's awareness of contemporary social failings.

"The pope's message does not shrink from a candid and profound criticism of the ills of modern society, and its focus on materialism over care for others," he told OSV News. "His pastoral guidance on how to overcome those shortcomings is clear."

Berry declared himself "thrilled" and "encouraged" by Leo's "strong comments on the need to not only serve the poor — but advocate for the poor, and try to change unjust systems, policies, and practices."

He also found the pontiff's words concerning migrants timely.

"Pope Leo's strong scriptural teaching on the importance of treating immigrants and migrants with dignity, respect, and love is also so very important given the situation in America and other countries, today," Berry said.

Michele Dunne — a professed Secular Franciscan and executive director of the Washington-based Franciscan Action Network, which describes its mission as "seeking to transform United States public policy related to peace making, care for creation, poverty and human rights" — was also encouraged by the pope's significant emphasis on serving the poor.

"St. Francis and St. Clare are very well known in the Franciscans as a movement for caring for the poor," Dunne told OSV News. "But I think what the Holy Father really does here is to signal them just briefly, and really go into how care for the poor is at the very heart of the church from the very beginning."

Leo devotes multiple paragraphs to illustrating the continuity of the church's mission to the poor, noting "all the different examples and ways — from the life of Jesus himself to the early followers and then through centuries and centuries of the church — to say care for the poor is not something that just a few people have done at a few times," Dunne said.

"It's not something exceptional," she affirmed. "It's something essential to Christianity — and the preferential option for the poor is not optional, it's essential."

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