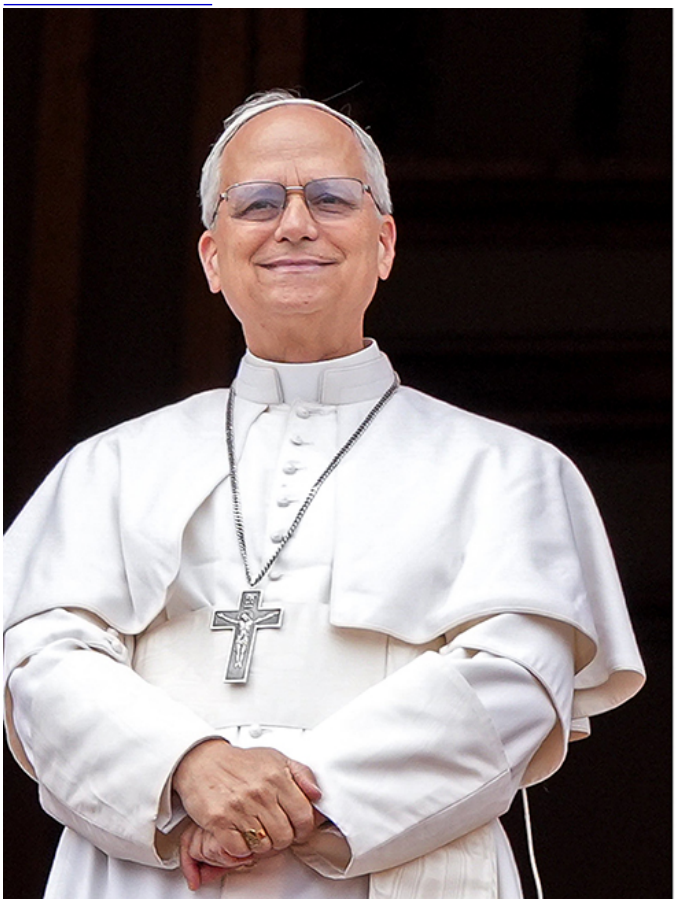
Opinion
Guest Voices




This is a combination of Pope Leo XIV looking out to the crowd from St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican as he leads 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 photos/CNS photo/Crosiers/Lola Gomez)



by Stan Chu Ilo

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The words "I have loved you" (Revelation 3:9) form both the title and the heart of Pope Leo XIV's first apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te*. The phrase is Christ's own declaration to a fragile community with little power or influence, yet one reminded of the "inexhaustible mystery" of God's love that lifts the lowly and the poor.

Read alongside Pope Francis' final encyclical, *Dilexit Nos* ("He Loved Us"), the two titles become a single theological diptych. *Dilexit Nos* contemplates the love revealed in the heart of Jesus; *Dilexi Te* extends that love outward — to the poor, the suffering, the peripheries, the living wounds of humanity. In the movement from *He loved us* to *I have loved you*, we trace an unbroken line between Francis and Leo: discipleship rooted in divine love, unfolded as concrete social and ecclesial responsibility.

Leo makes this continuity explicit: "I am happy to make this document my own — adding some reflections — and to issue it at the beginning of my own pontificate, since I share the desire of my beloved predecessor that all Christians come to appreciate the close connection between Christ's love and his summons to care for the poor" (*Dilexi Te*, 3). To choose "love for the poor" at the outset of a pontificate is not a strategic branding of compassion; it is a spiritual orientation. It tells us where this pope stands and where he hopes to lead the church: toward the peripheries where Christ already waits.



Pope Francis blesses the sculpture "Jesus the Homeless" during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Nov. 20, 2013. When Pope Leo XIV's first apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te,* is read alongside Pope Francis' final encyclical, *Dilexit Nos*, the two titles become a single theological diptych, writes Stan Chu Ilo. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

Augustine's lens: The whole Christ

This theological reflection reads the five chapters of *Dilexi Te* through St. Augustine's theology of the *totus Christus* — the whole Christ, head and body. "Let us rejoice and give thanks; we have become not only Christians but Christ himself. For if He is the Head, we are the members; He and we together are the whole man" (*In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 21, 8).

From this unity, Augustine develops his distinction between *frui* (enjoyment) and *uti* (use): God alone is to be enjoyed for God's own sake; all created things are to be used as means toward communion with God (*De Doctrina Christiana* I, 3-4). Sin dis-

orders this love — enjoying what should be used, using what should be enjoyed — thus building the "earthly city" that loves itself to the contempt of God, in contrast with the "City of God," which loves God to the contempt of self (*De Civitate Dei*, XIV, 28).

Leo explicitly retrieves this Augustinian grammar of love. Citing Augustine (*Sermo* 86, 5, 12), he teaches that temporal goods are not evil in themselves but must be rightly ordered (*ordinatio bonorum temporalium*) toward love of God and neighbor (*Dilexi Te*, 45). Wealth, property and labor serve communion, not domination. Detached from love, such goods become instruments of injustice; ordered by charity, they become means of grace and participation in providence.

Leo writes: "Augustine puts the following words in the Lord’s mouth: … 'I have been given hospitality, but I will give a home; I was visited when I was sick, but I will give health; I was visited in prison, but I will give freedom. The bread you have given to my poor has been consumed, but the bread I will give will not only refresh you, but will never end.' " (45). Here, Christian stewardship becomes Eucharistic: the world itself — work, property, policy, science — can be oriented to the altar of love.



A pedestrian passes a homeless woman in Lisbon, Portugal, Aug 2, 2023. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

Dilexi Te is a sustained attempt to mend the fracture between theological principles and historical realities. Leo offers a structural and theological hermeneutic of poverty — one that discerns, with the eyes of faith, how divine love labors within history's fractures (10-15; 27; 81; 90-97). He asks searching questions: What does poverty mean in our time? Why are people poor? How do institutions manufacture poverty (92, 94, 106, 108, 114)? Where do our programs unintentionally objectify the poor (14)?

The pope moves social teaching from abstraction to embodiment by grounding it in Scripture and tradition, the witness of saints, and insights from the social sciences. Augustine would call this learning to "use the world without being used by it" (*uti mundo, non frui mundo*), so that all things become paths to love.

What emerges is a movement from critical discernment of this historical hour — with its stubborn social structures that perpetuate injustice and ecclesial structures that hinder renewal — to a prophetic reawakening of the church's mission to the poor as the very heart of discipleship. Leo calls the whole church to recover the *totus Christus* in action: the head who loves, and the body learning to love as he loves — especially in the poor who bear his image (23–26). In this way, *Dilexi Te* is not merely a social document; it is a mystical-moral map.

Related: 9 things to know about 'Dilexi Te,' Pope Leo's first apostolic exhortation

'A few essential words'

Leo begins with a woman who anoints Jesus with costly oil. Misunderstood by the disciples, she becomes an icon of rightly ordered love. She delights in the Lord — not the perfume, not the price. It is an act showing pure love ordered to God. Leo draws the consequence: "those who suffer know how great even a small gesture of affection can be" (4). For the pope, love for the Lord and love for the poor are one (5). In the poor, Christ continues to say, "I am with you always." Augustine would name this the *totus Christus*: the head acting through his body; Christ loving Christ in his members.

The phrase "church of the poor" was forged in witness, not theory. During the Second Vatican Council, bishops in Rome's catacombs pledged simplicity and pastoral closeness to the poor — the Catacombs Pact. This identity must take institutional and pastoral shape. "In a Church that recognizes in the poor the face of Christ and in material goods the instrument of charity, Augustine's thought remains a sure light" (47). Rightly ordered love requires concrete forms: budgets, ministries, formation, leadership, and ecclesial structures that put the poor at the center.

When Leo remembers Lawrence pointing to the poor as "the treasures of the church," Augustine's realism is close by: "Give bread to the hungry but also give love; for if you give bread and withhold love, you have given nothing" (*Sermo* 389). Here charity is not philanthropy; it is justice restored. Every act of care is sacramental communion — Christ touching Christ.

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Leo situates this theology within the past 150 years of Catholic social teaching — a single tradition of love made social. He confronts structures of sin, ecological debt, and the "throwaway culture" (91-97), quoting Francis. Augustine helps us name what is at stake: the two cities are distinguished by their loves. Modern inequality is not simply a policy failure; it is a dis-order of love. When self-love organizes society — when consumption, security or profit is enjoyed as an ultimate good — institutions inevitably plunder under the name of peace. Leo's critique of economies that discard the weak (94, 96) and democracies that silence the poor (81) is an Augustinian judgment on a misdirected *ordo amoris*.

Conversely, the *City of God* is built on rightly ordered love in which temporal goods are used to serve communion and God alone is enjoyed. Thus, Leo's call for the "developing effective policies for societal change" (98-104) is not an intrusion of politics into religion; it is the church participating in Christ's work of ordering creation in love. Almsgiving itself must be purified: it is not transaction but transformation (115-121). "If you give bread to the hungry but do not love him, you have given nothing," Augustine says; Leo agrees, insisting that authentic almsgiving "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" (116). Charity collapses without communion.

Against moralized materialism

There is a statement in *Dilexi Te* that should be engraved on the conscience of the church. Leo writes: "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" (14). He inveighs against today's society that sometimes objectifies the poor as such "because they do not 'deserve' otherwise" (11,14).

This concise diagnosis names one of the deepest wounds of modern civilization and one of the most enduring sins of contemporary societies: the confusion of economic condition with moral worth. When people judge the poor instead of loving them, they invert the Gospel.

Augustine denounced this distortion 15 centuries ago. "God does not reward poverty itself, nor condemn riches per se, but piety in the one and impiety in the other" (*Epistula* 179, 24). "Consider what your heart is full of, not what your money box is empty of" (*Sermo* 60, 8). For Augustine, as for Leo, to blame the poor is to misunderstand grace.



A woman walks past a homeless man sleeping on a sidewalk in Baltimore June 6, 2023. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

Leo is calling for a hermeneutical inversion — a conversion of perception. What the world despises, the Gospel blesses; what the world fears, God embraces. We must move from *blaming the poor to learning from them*, from the cold efficiency of aid to the warm reciprocity of communion; from *charity as condescension to justice as participation*; from pity to partnership; from relief to the dismantling of structures that manufacture misery; and from considering the poor as a drag on society to removing the structural causes of poverty and the barriers to their social mobility so that they can be agents in their own history.

Augustine's luminous line returns: "The poor stretch out their hands to you, but in truth it is Christ who receives, that He may give to you in return" (*Sermo* 389). To meet the poor is to meet Christ; to love them is to enter the Eucharistic economy.

Africa's hopeful place

For Africa, this continuity between Francis and Leo is especially hopeful. However, speaking as an African theologian, I note the sparseness of references to Africa (beyond the moving vignette of Cairo's Ezbet El Nakhl in 79).

However, in this exhortation it is clear that the African continent too often treated as peripheral, now stands near the center of the church's imagination if we take Leo's message analysis of the social and structural bases of poverty, and the praxis of solidarity to heart. In the faces of African women and youth joining hands in social capitals to rewrite their history, in the songs and prayers that nourish the collaborative work for social repairs of resilient communities, the heart of Catholicism is beating strongly.

By listening, encouraging and learning from the wisdom of African communities in their fight against poverty and global injustice and in empowering and accompanying them as partners not as masters, the universal church can learn what the future of Catholicism looks like: not a fortress of power but a family of love; not a bastion of privilege but a field hospital of mercy; not a nostalgic refuge but a pilgrim people walking toward tomorrow; not through a needs-based paternalism, but an asset-based mutual gift exchange. Between *He loved us* and *I have loved you* stands a church summoned to prophetic and pragmatic solidarity at a kairotic hour.

And so the exhortation's closing assurance — "I have loved you" — becomes the pledge of the *totus Christus*: the head who loves through his body, the body that learns to love with the heart of God. Love received becomes love given. The altar stretches into the street; the host becomes hospitality; the church becomes what she celebrates. Only such a church can make visible the first fruits of the kingdom — where justice and mercy kiss, and where the poor no longer beg for bread but share in the banquet prepared from the foundation of the world.

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