Opinion
NCR Voices



A file photo shows migrant workers receiving lunch in San Diego, helped by parishioners from a local Catholic church that assists laborers in the area. (OSV News/David Maung)



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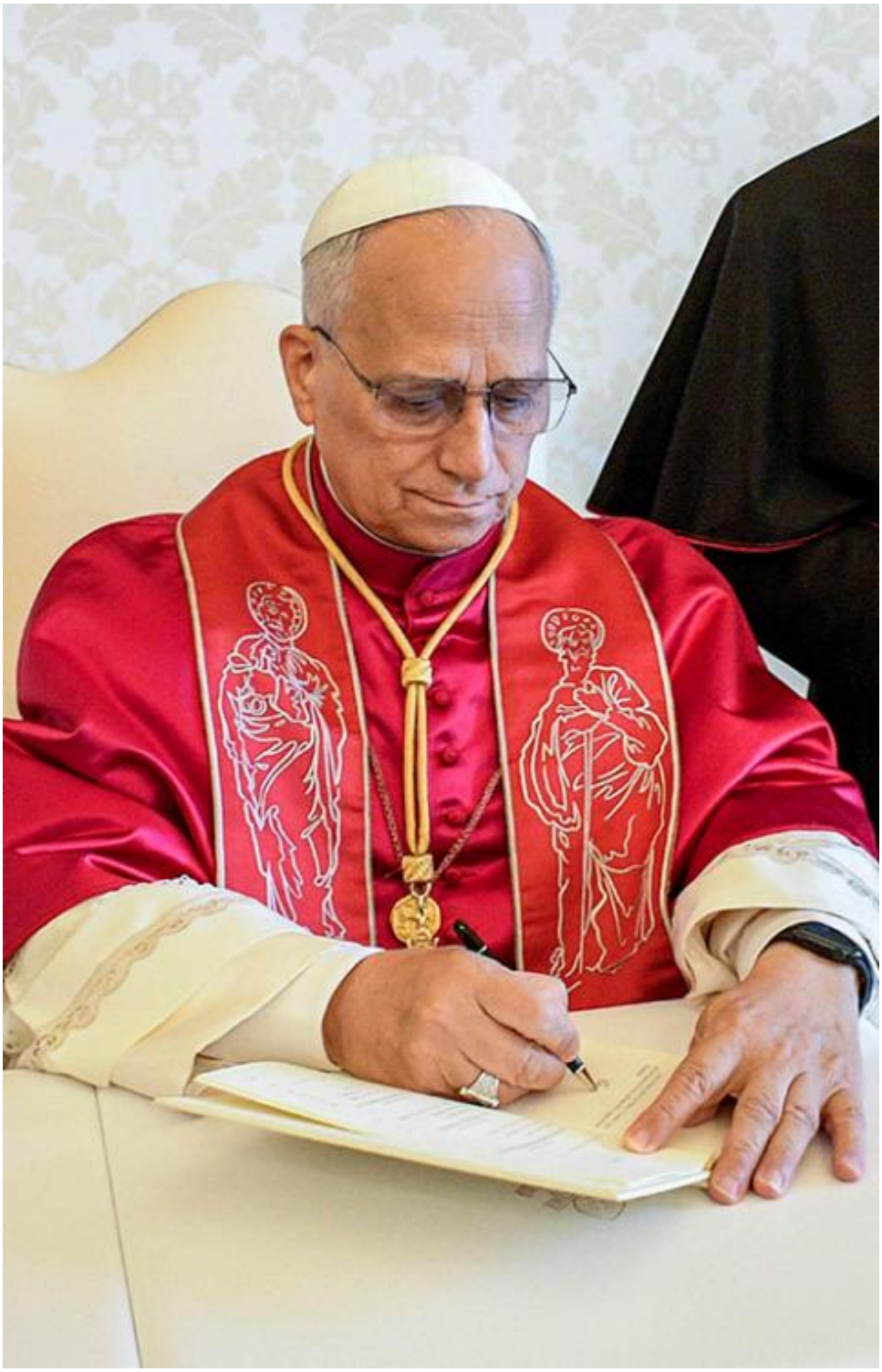
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In May 1965, the renowned German Jesuit theologian Fr. Karl Rahner delivered an address at an event sponsored by the charity organization Katholische Fürsorgeverein für Mädchen, Frauen, und Kinder ("the Catholic Welfare Association for Girls, Women, and Children" known today as the "Social Service of Catholic Women") in Cologne, Germany. His talk would later be published as "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and Love of God," which has become one of his most well-known essays.

Despite Rahner's notoriously dense theological writing and reliance on technical academic jargon, the central point of his argument is quite simple: The love of God and the love of neighbor are essentially united and cannot be properly understood apart from one another.

Rahner's point is not novel, as he is quick to point out, but grounded in numerous Scripture passages from both the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, as well as seen reflected throughout the New Testament letters. Rahner makes the point explicit early in his text that the truth of the Gospel is, essentially, about the love of neighbor. And this shouldn't be surprising given that this is the major focus of Jesus's preaching, especially in the parables, as well as in his earthly ministry.

I have been thinking a lot about Rahner's 60-year-old essay since the promulgation of Pope Leo XIV's apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te*, "On Love for the Poor," earlier this month. In many ways, Leo's exhortation and Rahner's essay make the same simple and radical point.



Pope Leo XIV signs his first apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te*, in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Oct. 4, 2025. The exhortation was released Oct. 9. (CNS/Vatican Media)

And yet, despite their directness and clarity, the reception of both texts has been mixed. I suppose that shouldn't be surprising, given the fact that Jesus's directness and clarity have also not often been well received over the centuries, including by self-identified Christians. This is a point that Leo makes directly early in the exhortation:

> Christians too, on a number of occasions, have succumbed to attitudes shaped by secular ideologies or political and economic approaches that lead to gross generalizations and mistaken conclusions. The fact that some dismiss or ridicule charitable works, as if they were an obsession on the part of a few and not the burning heart of the Church's mission, convinces me of the need to go back and re-read the Gospel, lest we risk replacing it with the wisdom of this world. The poor cannot be neglected if we are to remain within the great current of the Church's life that has its source in the Gospel and bears fruit in every time and place.

The pope is crystal clear about this central point of Christianity, what he calls "the burning heart of the Church's mission," and that it centers on love of our neighbor, especially in terms of care for the poor and vulnerable. Those who do not recognize this fact or choose, in their own ways, to mitigate or qualify this Gospel mandate are not living authentic Christianity.

For Rahner, the love of neighbor is not merely a Christian charitable expectation, but part of what it means to be fully human. He writes: "The act of personal love for another human being is therefore the all-embracing basic act of man which gives meaning, direction, and measure to everything else." This love for others, including and especially those outside our inner circle or chosen communities, is how we make manifest the love of God in this world.

Jesus in John's Gospel summarizes this succinctly: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another." To make clear the connection between this action in the world and our claim to Christian identity, he adds: "This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for another" (John 13:34-35).

It is quite troubling to see the ubiquity of a kind of pseudo-Christianity, adopted by private and public figures alike, that claims the identity and title "Christian" but

rejects this most fundamental tenet of faith.

Too many people who hold political office today, especially at the federal level, throw around words like "faith" and "Christianity" and "values," yet support dehumanizing practices that not only fail to love one's neighbor but also cause great harm and destruction.

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We see this in the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in major cities across the United States at the behest of the current presidential administration. The brutality displayed at both the individual and collective levels is in direct opposition to what is core to Christianity: love of neighbor. It should be a scandal that the current Trump administration's "Border Czar" Tom Homan, who speaks disparagingly of immigrants and is the unapologetic architect of the ICE cruelty, identifies as Catholic.

We see this in the persistent attacks on the federal workforce, beginning with the DOGE ("Department of Government Efficiency") gutting of offices and services, and continuing through the current government shutdown, which has lasted almost a full month. Many of the departments most devastated by both of these factors are specifically oriented toward helping the poor and caring for our neighbors — one thinks of USAID or the Department of Education, to name just two.

The effects on the poor and vulnerable in our society will become even more dire on Nov. 1 when SNAP benefits, also known as food stamps, will cease to be distributed to the hungry due to lack of funding resulting from the shutdown.

As the Catholic Church teaches clearly, the purpose of any government is to protect and promote the common good. As both Pope Francis and Pope Leo have encouraged us, we might think of this aspect of Catholic social teaching as "loving one's neighbor" at the institutional and societal level, and there are many self-identified Christians who are willfully and actively working against the common good.

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neighbor.

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We also see this in the way LGBTQ+ communities, especially transgender and nonbinary individuals, have been targeted and attacked. The denial of their existence and experience, the refusal to accept their reality and histories, and the active effort to scapegoat and eradicate them are not only sinful but also the exact opposite of Jesus's teaching about love of neighbor.

Famously, Jesus never placed a condition on what it means to be a neighbor. On the contrary, his most searing parables flip the hearer's expectations upside down in order to emphasize the radicality of God's call to love all.

If we call to mind the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), which Francis used to frame his 2020 encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, "On Fraternity and Social Friendship," we might recognize the behavior of the priest and Levite of Jesus' story in some of today's religious leaders who contribute to the harm, discrimination and suffering experienced by the LGBTQ+ community. In this case, those we would expect to love their neighbor because of their public religious commitment to Christianity are those first to walk on by without practicing what they profess to believe.

The key takeaway here is that to be a Christian is more than to merely claim such with one's words. It requires embodied action and the lived experience of loving one's neighbor. To do so is to live out the greatest commandment, to announce the inbreaking of the reign of God with our lives, and to love God in concrete and practical ways.

To ignore this divine mandate, to think that anything else matters more in Christianity than this, is to sidestep or reject the core of Jesus's clear and simple message. For those who still have doubts about the nonnegotiable obligation to love their neighbors — all their neighbors — they should take up Leo's advice "to go back and re-read the Gospel, lest we risk replacing it with the wisdom of this world."

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