



Venturing outwards in Love

An analysis of Pope Leo XIV's
first apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te*

By Daniel P. Scheid

Associate Professor | Moral Theology |

Boston College Clough School of Theology and Ministry

An analysis of Pope Leo XIV's first apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te*, reflecting on love of the poor and written in continuity with Pope Francis's *Dilexit Nos* by Dr. Daniel P. Scheid. This is a companion piece to *Answering the Call to Conversion* in 2025.



Cultivating an “ecological conversion”

In our overly busy world, we are faced with many social pressures calling for our attention: global political and economic turmoil; the looming implications of artificial intelligence; and the ecological threats to our common home in climate change and biodiversity loss. It is tempting to feel overwhelmed and to turn our gaze inwards and to focus on those in our immediate circles. Yet our Catholic tradition is always calling us to venture outwards in love, for God, for the Earth, and for our neighbors. Catholics can find an immense resource for cultivating an “ecological conversion,” as Catholic social teaching urges, in *Dilexi Te* (“I have loved you”), Pope Leo XIV's first apostolic exhortation that reflects on love of the poor.

This exhortation was written “in continuity with the Encyclical *Dilexit Nos* (#3), Pope Francis' final encyclical, which meditated on the immense love at the heart of Jesus Christ. Pope Leo, following and intentionally building on the legacy of Pope Francis, seeks to confirm for all fellow Christians “the close connection between Christ's love and his summons to care for the poor” (#3). More than just restating Catholic social teaching's principle of the preferential option for the poor, Pope Leo wants a deep and prophetic love for all the marginalized to animate the life of the Church.

An impassioned plea for compassion and mercy

This exhortation is focused on the poor, on the millions living lives unworthy of their intrinsic human dignity, because of global economic dynamics perpetuated by the wealthy and powerful. Pope Leo decries the gap between the rich and poor, the staggering inequality that shields the wealthy from even noticing the conditions of life faced by the poor. His primary target is to repudiate the globalization of indifference, and the exhortation is an impassioned plea for compassion and mercy, which lie at the core of Christian discipleship. He observes “the growth of a wealthy elite, living in a bubble of comfort and luxury, almost in another world compared to ordinary people” (#11). His target is not particular individuals, but the pervasive sinful attitudes that work through structures and society, the “social sin” that hardens into “structures of sin” (#93).

Integral Ecology: Uniting our love for the Earth with the love for the poor

Pope Leo continues and strengthens Pope Francis' articulation of the Catholic call to love and to protect creation by promoting an "integral ecology" that unites our love for the Earth with the love for the poor. For Pope Francis, we cannot separate our concerns for our fellow human beings, especially the most excluded and marginalized, from our concerns for nonhumans and ecosystems and the health of our sister, Mother Earth. As Pope Francis urged in *Laudato Si'*, we must learn to hear "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (#139). Leo asks us to hear this cry clearly, coming from the poor, the Earth, and future generations who will live with the consequences of the choices we make today.

Pope Leo is passionate to demonstrate not only that the preferential option for the poor is at the heart of the scriptures and of the Church's history and mission, but it is also the core of a renewal of the Church. Love for the poor entails loving and caring for the Earth as well, and it's a summons to let our hearts be softened from indifference, and to feel our intimate connection to the poor and to the Earth.

The current global economic model, for example, does not favor investment in people who are slow, weak, or less talented, and Leo asks whether we are secretly presuming that they lack dignity:

"Does this mean that the less gifted are not human beings? 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).



A call to encounter and to welcome all the beings who belong to God

Leo offers a profound critique of our economies and societies and how we assign value, often treating the Earth, nonhumans, and ecosystems, and the poor as if all of them lack intrinsic dignity. Should the Earth be viewed merely as a resource and used by a small subset of human beings who impose a dictatorship of their economic ideology? No, insists Pope Leo, we must see the Earth as God's creation, as a place to encounter and to welcome all the beings who belong to God. Echoing Francis in *Laudato Si'*, who argues that how we treat nonhumans is a test of our own human dignity, Leo shows us that how we collectively answer these poignant questions will speak to the way in which we regain our moral dignity, or, as Leo trenchantly predicts, we may “fall into a cesspool.”

In *Dilexit Te* Pope Leo issues a profound call to conversion and a plea to bring the poor and marginalized into the center of our moral vision. Pope Leo is convinced that hearing the cry of the poor will revitalize the Church, and bring energy and authenticity to the Church's mission, including the call to ecological conversion.

About the Author

Daniel P. Scheid, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Moral Theology at Boston College Clough School of Theology and Ministry. He specializes in ecological ethics and eco-theology, comparative theology, and Catholic social teaching.

