

Pope Leo and love of the poor

Ever since his election last May, the Church and the world have waited for a first major teaching document from Pope Leo XIV. Now the wait is over. The Holy Father recently released an apostolic exhortation called *Dilexi te* (“I have loved you...”) on love for the poor. It’s good to remember that before his election as pope, Leo XIV served for 20 years as a priest and bishop among the poor of Peru. He has a very personal knowledge of the needs of the poor, but also of what the poor have to offer, and now he passes along that wisdom to the world.

One of the challenges of our time is an attitude of indifference towards others, especially toward those who are considered inconvenient—the poor, the homeless, the elderly, the lonely. But Jesus himself warns us against this kind of indifference. One of his most challenging parables tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man ignored the poor man, Lazarus, at his doorstep, and went about his life as if Lazarus wasn’t even there. When they both died, Lazarus was comforted in the bosom of Abraham, and the rich man suffered in torment. His indifference to Lazarus in time earned him a reward of agony in eternity.

Yet, Jesus became poor for our sakes when, through his Incarnation, he took our human nature to himself so that we might become rich in God’s grace. He lived simply, even poorly, during his earthly life. He identified himself with the poor, the hungry, the homeless: “Whatever you did to one of these least ones, you did it to me.” Conversely, whatever we fail to do for the least ones, we fail to do for Christ. In imitation of Jesus, all Christians are called to the same humble disposition of bending down to the least among us.

Pope Leo teaches us, as Jesus did, that the two great commandments—love of God and love of neighbor—are inseparable. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart... and love your neighbor as yourself.” As Bishop Robert Barron has written, “In loving God you feel the feelings of God, and God is compassionate to the poor and oppressed. That’s all the argument that a biblical person needs.” For that reason, love and care for the poor are not an optional ideal to be chosen by the pious few. This is the necessary path for all those who wish to follow Christ. The Holy Father says, “I too consider it essential to insist on this path to holiness.”

Is this a new teaching? Not at all. Pope Leo draws from the Scriptures and from the constant teaching of the Church. The Second Vatican Council taught this imperative of care for the poor and needy of the world. All the popes since that time have given their own reflections on these teachings: St. Paul VI, St. John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. On all their apostolic journeys around the world, they unflinchingly drew attention to the plight of the poor, and called upon people of good will to reach out to those in need.

We can see this teaching lived out in the lives of the saints too. St. Francis of Assisi was renowned not only for his own poverty, but also for his compassion toward those in need. St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, the first canonized American saint, spent her entire life assisting poor immigrants. St. Teresa of Calcutta is known the world over for her selfless love for the “poorest of the poor,” those who were abandoned, destitute, and dying. Millions of other unsung heroes have also cared for the poor in response to the call of Christ.

The Holy Father reminds us that poverty has many forms: material, spiritual, social, and cultural. The Christian call to love for the poor isn’t just about giving a hand-out to someone in material need. It is a recognition of the brother or sister in front of us, seeing their humanity, and relating to them in a personal way. In the poor, we can see the face of Christ himself, who invites us to show the same compassion that he showed to us. Pope Leo notes that spiritual poverty is often the most severe, the poverty of those who do not know God’s love or the saving truth of his Gospel. There are many who live without hope, or without any feeling that they matter to anyone. Through the gift of our time, our listening, our simple concern for their well-being, we can begin to alleviate this poverty of the spirit. By our small acts of love, we give witness to the truth of our faith in Jesus.

Pope Leo makes the important point that care for the poor should not simply be passed off to agencies of civil government. Yes, government has a responsibility for the common good, and thus for

those who are poor. But that responsibility also falls to each member of the community, and especially to the people of the Church. The call to charity—sacrificial love—is intrinsic to our Christian lives. He writes: “When the Church bends down to care for the poor, she reaches her highest posture.” In other words, we become the Church Christ means us to be when we manifest genuine love and care for those most in need.

It has been fascinating to watch and listen to this first pope from the United States. Let me suggest that we all now pay close attention to his teaching as well. *Dilexi te* is accessible online, and I’m sure it will soon be published as well. Let’s read it and take it to heart.