

Pope Leo explains the Church, Or The Path to Sainthood Today

In 1940, Mortimer Adler published “How to Read a Book.” It continues to be a classic. The main advice is this: having reached the last page, you are now ready to really read the book. Why? Often what is at the end is the key we need to absorb the opening chapters.

On October 4, 2025, Pope Leo XIV published his Apostolic Exhortation “Dilexi te: on love for the poor.” The text is available online in multiple languages. Adler’s advice applies especially to this document for varied reasons.

First, the Exhortation can be viewed as the heart of official Church teaching since 1945. The deadly carnage of two world wars and ongoing conflicts caused reflections that we find in the Vatican Council II documents, the next Synods, and the writings of six popes. If you haven’t had the inclination to read Catholicism by John T. McGreevy, or 3,000 pages of council and papal texts, I recommend Dilexi te (title from John 13). Twenty-five pages plus footnotes. The Holy Scriptures breathe through this extended reflection.

Second, I read the Holy Father’s words after I finished my column about the divisions and turbulence of our times. These make it difficult to stay centered in our Faith, centered in Jesus’s love and presence. While I was cataloging actual issues, I might have been avoiding a central issue. So I shelved that draft. I stare at the pope’s words which are causing me to “experience a reproof” (par. 102) – either I am not seeing at all, or am inconsistent in appreciating my role in accompanying the poor. Or in welcoming their experience and accompaniment (par. 99-102).

Third, Church Social Teaching about institutional injustice, about structural causes of poverty (par. 94), is based on social experience and not a theological abstraction. Some people who only read summaries of this Exhortation, or who read only the first part of the whole, may repeat the lie that these popes are communist or socialist. My reading: if Christians and Catholics were consistent in faith across time, those ideologies could not have taken root. This Pope does not rail against capitalism or property, only highlighting the extremes that lock out the inclusion of the poor and

marginalized. While the Pope writes for a worldwide audience, there is much here for our own country, dioceses and parishes.

Fourth, our diocese and parishioners are often in the “right spot” and offer active assistance to needy people. The Pope widens the definition of the poor very wisely (par. 9). While aid to the poor and almsgiving remain necessary out of charity, such aid does not obscure the requirements of justice. For example, systems of education and health care should help needy people out of generational dependence on aid. As Pope John Paul II wrote, access to jobs and meaningful work are central to human dignity. Pope Leo rightly points out that our charitable work does not reduce government’s responsibilities to protect or build avenues of advancement.

Fifth, and most importantly, “charity is not optional but a requirement of true worship” (42). “Works of mercy are recommended as a sign of authenticity of worship” (27). At Mass when we see a deacon next to the bishop or priest, that deacon is a living question mark at the altar: how are we doing for the widow, the orphan, the poor, the marginalized, the hungry? (Bishops are ordinarily flanked by two deacons, amplifying the question for him personally.)

Decades ago, I ministered near a parish whose council’s consultations were always colored by the question, “how does this affect the poor?” Pope Leo’s words update the same question to ask how we have listened to the poor themselves. To treat them as neighbors or conversation partners, not as objects of our kindness (100).

Finally, we cannot read or talk about the exhortation without placing our hands in Christ’s hands. Citing Pope Francis (31), Pope Leo writes: “The message of God’s word is ‘so clear and direct, so simple and eloquent, that no ecclesial interpretation has the right to relativize it.’”

Hmm. What will our meeting agendas look like when we shine *Dilexi te* on them?

END