



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Most Reverend John E. Keehner

DIOCESE OF SIOUX CITY

1821 JACKSON STREET, SIOUX CITY, IOWA 51105

(712) 233-7555

31 May 2026

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On Thursday, June 11, the Vigil of the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Bishops of the United States of America, meeting in plenary session in Orlando, Florida, will consecrate our nation to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. We will be doing so in celebration of our Semi quinentennial, the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

In doing so, we are not only celebrating this momentous occasion but asking for God's blessings especially on our nation—on our government, our leaders, our citizens, those who serve our nation in the armed forces, indeed, all who call this great land home.

It is for that reason that I have issued the following pastoral letter, *God So Loved the World—A Pastoral Reflection on the Meaning of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for Our World Today*. Attached to the letter is an appendix offering various forms of prayer to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus for personal prayer and reflection. My hope is that we would each take time in the coming days and weeks to reflect on what it means for us to be a great nation and what it means for us to live today in a manner that is faithful to the ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness which were held in sacred esteem by our nation's founders. I invite you to read the letter but also, more importantly, to take advantage of this opportunity to pray in a special way for our nation and to deepen your own personal relationship with the Lord Jesus and the love he shares with us through his Most Sacred Heart.

Sincerely in Christ,

+Most Reverend John E. Keehner
Bishop of Sioux City

God So Loved the World—A Pastoral Reflection on the Meaning of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for Our World Today

Early in the Gospel according to John, Jesus meets with Nicodemus, who out of fear comes to him in the cover of night (3:1-2). Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he is struggling with his faith. He comes to him because his heart is troubled. He comes to Jesus seeking answers to his questions, certainly, but also to soothe the aching of his troubled heart. In answer to the question of how one already born in this world can be born from above, Jesus responds:

“No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God. (John 3:13-21).

This passage has been quoted, and often misquoted, for centuries. Its citation, specifically John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” has been blazoned on banners held aloft at sporting events, caught on television cameras as a silent yet powerful beacon in a world which is so often very dark.

God so loved the world. In Latin, *sic Deus dilexit mundum*. These words are inscribed at the bottom of one of my favorite images of the Lord Jesus, which is an image painted sometime in the eighteenth century by an unknown European artist. The painting was found in a church building in France which was slated for demolition and brought to the United States, where it found prominence especially in the early years of the twenty first century. The painting focuses on

the face of Jesus, crowned with thorns, his face lined with tears and clearly illustrating intense personal suffering, his burning heart exposed upon his chest. There is an interplay between the light emanating from the face of Jesus and the darkness surrounding him. My first reaction to this painting was visceral. I wanted to look away. And yet I found myself drawn into it, my eyes focusing on the eyes of Jesus and the suffering those eyes clearly radiate as they penetrate the one looking upon him. And as I was drawn into those eyes, my thoughts settled upon these words from the Book of Lamentations:

*Come, all who pass by the way,
pay attention and see:
Is there any pain like my pain,
which has been ruthlessly inflicted upon me,
With which the LORD has tormented me
on the day of his blazing wrath? (Lamentations 1:12).*

Sic Deus dilexit mundum. God so loved the world.

As our nation approaches the two hundred fiftieth anniversary of its founding in the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, the Bishops of our Nation through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, overwhelmingly agreed that we should observe this tremendous occasion by consecrating our nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In doing so, we are reminded not only of the great blessings which are ours as a nation—the freedom and liberty which are ours because of the sacrifices of prior generations, but also of the great responsibility which those blessings require of us. We are reminded that these blessings can only be appreciated fully in the context of our relationship with Almighty God, the giver of every good gift, the Creator of this abundant land, who forever calls us into relationship with himself and precisely through his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

It is not coincidental that this particular devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus would weigh upon the minds of our nation's episcopate. For indeed, only thirteen months before, on October 24, 2024, our Holy Father Pope Francis, in his fourth and final encyclical, *Dilexit nos... He loved us...*, held this poignant image up for the consideration of the Church and the world as a reminder of our need to rededicate ourselves, to rededicate our lives, to the loving and merciful heart of Jesus. While this encyclical was written to commemorate the three hundred

fiftieth anniversary of the first apparition of Jesus to Saint Margaret Mary Aloccoque in 1673, it provides much more than a reminder of what has happened in the past. Rather, it provides a historical, scriptural and theological context as a backdrop to this devotion and a plea for us as a Church but also as individual Christians to rededicate ourselves to the Heart of Jesus, to allow the Heart of Jesus and his undying love for the world to permeate every aspect of our lives as the center of history and the center of our own individual lives. Nor is it coincidental that our present Holy Father, Pope Leo, reiterated the message of Pope Francis with his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Dilexi te*, in which he emphasized the profound connection of God's love for all of us, for all of humanity, with his special love for the poor: "Love for the poor is an essential element of the history of God's dealings with us; it rises up from the heart of the Church as a constant appeal to the hearts of the faithful, both individually and in our communities. As the Body of Christ, the Church experiences the lives of the poor as her very 'flesh,' for theirs is a privileged place within the pilgrim people of God. Consequently, love for the poor — whatever the form their poverty may take — is the evangelical hallmark of a Church faithful to the heart of God" (*Dilexi te*, #103).

But what does it mean for us to be faithful to the heart of God as individuals? What does it mean for us to be faithful to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to the Jesus Christ who, as pictured in that beautiful image to which I have referred as I began this reflection, weeps with us and for us, plumbing the depths of our own hearts and souls by looking into our own eyes, compelling us with his own insistent gaze to see in his own eyes the undying love of our God and Creator?

We live in a world that is fractured—fractured by war and violence—fractured by a political landscape which is increasingly polarized, so that we are so often unable to recognize what unites us but focus, rather, on what divides us. This is also true of the Church. Focusing on the heart of Jesus Christ and his undying love for the world, his undying love for all of humanity, certainly, but also his undying love for each of us as individuals, allows us to take our focus off of what divides us and to focus, rather, on what unites us, namely, our common faith, our common baptism, our oneness in the Eucharistic Sacrifice as we share together in the Body and Blood of Christ.

Our late Holy Father, Pope Francis, wrote:

We see, then, that in the heart of each person there is a mysterious connection between self-knowledge and openness to others, between the

encounter with one's personal uniqueness and the willingness to give oneself to others. We become ourselves only to the extent that we acquire the ability to acknowledge others, while only those who can acknowledge and accept themselves are then able to encounter others. (Dilexit nos, #18).

Devotion to the heart of Jesus, the Holy Father points out, is directly related to our ability as individuals to relate to the hearts of those around us, to acknowledge them, in effect, to love them. This requirement that we love our neighbor is expressed quite clearly in the Prayer After Communion taken from the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, which pleads: "May this sacrament of charity, O Lord, make us fervent with the fire of holy love, so that, drawn always to your Son, we may learn to see him in our neighbor" (*Roman Missal*, 504). As Pope Francis reminded us, in quoting the great Russian novelist Dostoevsky, "'If the heart is not alive, man remains a stranger to himself'" (Dilexit nos, #12). And if we remain strangers to ourselves, then how can we ever hope to appreciate what it means for us to be in a living, life-giving relationship with our Lord and Savior? Pope Francis expanded on this when he quoted his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, who stated in his Angelus address of June 1, 2008 that we need "to recognize in the heart of Christ an intimate and daily presence in our lives: 'Every person needs a 'center' for his or her own life, a source of truth and goodness to draw upon in the events, situations and struggles of daily existence. All of us, when we pause in silence, need to feel not only the beating of our own heart, but deeper still, the beating of a trustworthy presence, perceptible with faith's senses and yet much more real: the presence of Christ, the heart of the world" (*Dilexit nos*, #81).

Jesus made this point abundantly clear on the night before he died. Gathering with his disciples in the upper room, he washed their feet, as a sign to them of the service they were called to render to one another. He called them no longer slaves or servants but friends. And as he reclined at table with them, he opened his heart to them, revealing to them the fullness of God's love for them and God's desire to provide for them, to call them to Himself:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. Where [I] am going you know the way."

Thomas said to him, "Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?"

Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:1-6)

How often over the past thirty-three years of priesthood have I preached on these words, especially at the funerals of the faithful departed, including members of my own family. How often have I, myself, found comfort in these very words—comfort at the assurance that we know the way to the Father because we know his Son, Jesus Christ. How often have I found my own heart less troubled, more assured, because I know that the Lord Jesus has opened his heart to me. Jesus has shared his love with me, allowing me to share in the fullness of that love by virtue of my ability to share in his Body and Blood in the Eucharist. I do not find it surprising, then, that the Holy Father would have made this same connection in his own reflection that the promotion of the frequent Holy Communion and devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus “led to a clearer realization that in the Eucharist the merciful and ever-present love of the heart of Christ invites us to union with him” (*Dilexit nos*, #84). He later quoted Saint Margaret Mary in pointing out that the core message that has been handed on to us believers and disciples of Jesus can be summed up in her words: ““This is the heart that so loved human beings that it has spared nothing, even emptying and consuming itself in order to show them its love”” (*Dilexit nos*, #121).

Sic Deus dilexit mundum. God so loved the world.

As we take time in the next days and weeks to prepare for the consecration of our beloved Nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, perhaps we as a local Church, as parishes, and as individuals, might consider what it means for us to open ourselves, our hearts, to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Perhaps we might consider what it would mean for us, in the words of my former Bishop, David Bonnar, Bishop of the Diocese of Youngstown, who encouraged readers “to take heart” in his own pastoral letter, *Take Heart! Do Not Lose Heart! Behold the Sacred Heart!*, (June 13, 2025). He noted, after a brief consideration of the scriptural foundations of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and papal pronouncements on the subject, beginning with Pope Leo XIII and ending with our present Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV: “The best strategy to address that state of a lost heart is to look to Jesus and his heart” (*Take Heart! Do Not Lose Heart! Behold the Sacred Heart!*, #9). He then also cited the late Holy Father Pope Francis in exhorting, ““Let us turn, then, to the heart of Christ, that core of his being, which is a blazing furnace

of divine and human love and the most sublime fulfillment to which humanity can aspire. There, in that heart, we truly come at last to know ourselves and learn how to love” (*Dilexit nos*, #30).

There, in that heart, the Sacred Heart of our Lord, Jesus Christ, we can come at last to know ourselves and learn how to love. How true it is that the life of Christian discipleship is all about coming to know ourselves at an ever-deeper level so that we can learn how to love. And this is possible only if we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ and the fullness of his undying love for us. This is possible only if we come to realize what it means for us to be loved beyond our ability to understand. Saint Peter Chrysologus, a fifth century Bishop of Ravenna, amplified this idea in one of his sermons on the passion and wounds of Christ:

Do not be afraid. This cross inflicts a mortal injury, not on me, but on death. These nails no longer pain me, but only deepen your love for me. I do not cry out because of these wounds, but through them I draw you into my heart. My body was stretched on the cross as a symbol, not of how much I suffered but of my all-embracing love. I count it no loss to shed my blood: it is the price I have paid for your ransom. Come, then, return to me and learn to know me as your father, who repays good for evil, love for injury, and boundless charity for piercing wounds (Sermo 108: Pt 52, 499-500).

Indeed, the saving act of our salvation, the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is an act of love in which Christ invites into his wounded heart so that we can experience not pain and suffering but profound healing and forgiveness and his desire that we share in the fullness of his life and his love.

As Pope Francis stated in concluding his exhortation, “Christ’s love can give a heart to our world and revive love wherever we think that the ability to love has been definitively lost” (*Dilexit nos*, #218). May we learn what it means to accept that love and to see it for what it is. May we come to know the Lord Jesus and to love him with hearts that are undivided, with hearts that can perceive what it means for him to so love the world that he would suffer and die and rise from the dead for the world and for each of us. May we have hearts that are open to see him and to know him in our brothers and sisters, even those who have hurt us, even those from whom we are alienated. May we come to realize in the depths of our hearts that “the wounded side of Christ continues to pour forth that stream which is never exhausted, never passes away, but offers itself time and time again

to all those who wish to love as he did. For his love alone can bring about a new humanity" (*Dilexit nos*, #219).

In conclusion, we are reminded of the words we pray every year in the Collect for the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus:

*Grant, we pray, almighty God
That we, who glory in the Heart of your beloved Son
And recall the wonders of his love for us,
May be made worthy to receive
An overflowing measure of grace
From that fount of heavenly gifts.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever. Amen. (Roman Missal, 502).*

Bibliography

The Roman Missal, 3rd typical ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011)

Bonnar, David. Bishop of Youngstown. *Take Heart! Do Not Lose Heart! Behold the Sacred Heart! A Pastoral Letter*, 13 June 2025

Francis, Pope. Encyclical Letter *Dilexit Nos* (24 October 2024), 170 : AAS 116 (2024)

Leo XIV, Pope. Apostolic Exhortation. *Dilext te* (4 October 2025), AAS 117 (2025).

Peter Chrysologus, Saint. Sermo 108: Pt 52, 499-500

All Scriptural references taken from the *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. ©2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.