

What is an Apostolic Exhortation?

An Apostolic Exhortation is a teaching document from the pope, which often aims to exhort (encourage) a particular virtue or activity. Like many papal encyclicals, apostolic exhortations have often developed themes of the Church's social teaching.

What does *Dilexi te* mean?

Dilexi te means "I have loved you" and echoes the title of Pope Francis' last encyclical letter *Dilexit Nos* ("he loved us"), on the devotion to the Sacred Heart. The title is taken from the words of Jesus in Revelation 3:9 and the exhortation is addressed "to all Christians on love for the poor."

Why has it been released at this time?

Just as Pope Francis completed the exhortation that was started by Pope Benedict XVI, *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Leo XIV now completes the work Pope Francis started before his death.

With the release of his first major magisterial document a few months into his papacy, we read Pope Leo's developed thoughts on the Christian life for the first time, both in humble continuity with Pope Francis and with his own particular style and experience.

Signed on the feast of St Francis of Assisi, the document imparts the lesson that St Francis learnt personally and embodied - that a preferential love for the marginalised can renew both the Church and society.

What are the key messages in this document?

This exhortation is all about God's love for the most vulnerable and marginalised people in our society.

This is affirmed with many examples from the scriptures, the saints and religious orders, as well as in the development of Catholic social teaching in dialogue and engagement with the contemporary world. The document speaks of Jesus' identification with the hungry and marginalised, with workers and the rejected in the gospels; about St Francis and St Clare; the shared life of monastic orders and the biblical promise of liberation from oppression.

It also describes the multifaceted nature of poverty in the modern world. Social exclusion, personal fragility, lack of voice and rights are forms of poverty as well as lacking material resources. Pope Leo urges us, with his predecessor, to avoid old criteria to hide behind the idea that things are always getting better, and to ignore the new subtle forms of poverty, which may be all the more dangerous. We must reckon with increasing inequality, globalisation of indifference and the injustices that burden women.

We are reminded that Christ himself became poor, and that therefore we can see Christ in all those who are poor in our world today. We must therefore be particularly attentive to those who are most marginalised in our society and listen to the wisdom that only they can offer.

What is the preferential option for the poor?

The preferential option for the poor is a key theme of Catholic Social Teaching, reminding us that those who are experiencing poverty are given special attention in God's eyes. We are therefore called to put the needs of the marginalised and vulnerable first.

In the exhortation, Pope Leo writes that this preference for the poor "never indicates exclusivity or discrimination towards other groups which would be impossible for God... Wanting to inaugurate a kingdom of justice, fraternity

and solidarity, God has a special place in his heart for those who are discriminated against and, he asks us, his Church, to make a decisive and radical choice in favour of the weakest." (#16)

What does *Dilexi te* say about welcoming migrants?

"The experience of migration accompanies the history of the People of God" Pope Leo writes, citing the biblical examples, of Abraham, Moses, the Holy Family in their flight to Egypt and Christ himself in coming to live among us.

Dilexi te makes clear that welcoming migrants is therefore a crucial part of the Church's mission, recalling her history of the work which is continued today by Caritas Internationalis and other institutions, stating:

"The Church, like a mother, accompanies those who are walking. Where the world sees threats, she sees children; where walls are built, she builds bridges. She knows that her proclamation of the Gospel is credible only when it is translated into gestures of closeness and welcome. And she knows that in every rejected migrant, it is Christ himself who knocks at the door of the community" (#75)

What inspiration does Pope Leo XIV find in the saints?

Pope Leo celebrates the example of many holy men and women who have been true witnesses to Christian living in their treatment of those experiencing poverty or sickness, the imprisoned, uneducated and migrants.

More than thirty saints are mentioned by name, including St Francis and St Clare, St Augustine, St Benedict, St Teresa of Calcutta and St Oscar Romero.

The exhortation also reflects on the lives of those religious communities, many of them founded by saints, who through their common lives of voluntary poverty, have silently sowed the seeds of a new civilization based on an economy of solidarity rather than accumulation.

What does it mean for the Catholic community?

This exhortation is a reminder to us all that love and care for our neighbour and those who are poor and marginalised is a fundamental part of our faith.

Pope Leo mentions the need for us to raise our voices to call for an end to unjust structures and systems which keep people poor, even if others consider us foolish or naïve.

He also speaks about the importance of almsgiving as a way for us to express this faith and make a concrete difference to our brothers and sisters who are experiencing poverty.

"Our love and our deepest convictions need to be continually cultivated and we do so through our concrete actions. ... For this very reason, we Christians cannot abandon almsgiving." (#119)

In his response to the encyclical, Bishop Richard Moth writes:

"I echo Pope Leo when he writes 'Charity has the power to change reality; it is a genuine force for change in history.' Catholic charities, such as CAFOD and those under the umbrella of the Caritas Social Action Network in England and Wales, have long exercised a preferential option for the poor. As many countries continue to face acute poverty, and with a continuing cost-of-living crisis domestically, this exhortation is a timely reminder to renew our efforts to stand in solidarity, in word and deed, with the poor and marginalised."

As we renew our efforts towards solidarity, may we hear afresh the words of Jesus, addressed to each and every one of us: "I have loved you." (Rev 3: 9)

How can we respond to *Dilexi te*?