



1. "I HAVE LOVED YOU" (Rev 3:9). The Lord speaks these words to a Christian community that, unlike some others, had no influence or resources, and was treated instead with violence and contempt: "You have but little power... I will make them come and bow down before your feet" (Rev 3:8-9). This text reminds us of the words of the canticle of Mary: "He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Lk 1:52-53).

2. This declaration of love, taken from the Book of Revelation, reflects the inexhaustible mystery that Pope Francis reflected upon in the Encyclical *Dilexit Nos* on the human and divine love of the heart of Jesus Christ. There we saw how Jesus identified himself "with the lowest ranks of society" and how, with his love poured out to the end, he confirms the dignity of every human being, especially when "they are weak, scorned, or suffering." [1] As we contemplate Christ's love, "we too are inspired to be more attentive to the sufferings and needs of others, and confirmed in our efforts to share in his work of liberation as instruments for the spread of his love." [2]

3. For this reason, in continuity with the Encyclical *Dilexit Nos*, Pope Francis was preparing in the last months of his life an Apostolic Exhortation on the Church's care for the poor, to which he gave the title *Dilexi Te*, as if Christ speaks those words to each of them, saying: "You have but little power," yet "I have loved you" (Rev 3:9). I am happy to make this document my own — adding some reflections — and to issue it at the beginning of my own pontificate, since I share the desire of my beloved predecessor that all Christians come to appreciate the close connection between Christ's love and his summons to care for the poor. I too consider it essential to insist on this path to holiness, for "in this call to recognize him in the poor and the suffering, we see revealed the very heart of Christ, his deepest feelings and choices, which every saint seeks to imitate." [3]

CHAPTER ONE A FEW ESSENTIAL WORDS

4. Jesus' disciples criticized the woman who poured costly perfumed oil on his head. They said: "Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor." However, the Lord said to them in response: "You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me" (Mt 26:8-9, 11). That woman saw in Jesus the lowly and suffering Messiah on whom she could pour out all her love. What comfort that anointing must have brought to the very head that within a few days would be pierced by thorns! It was a small gesture, of course, but those who suffer know how great even a small gesture of affection can be, and how much relief it can bring. Jesus understood this and told the disciples that the memory of her gesture would endure: "Wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mt 26:13). The simplicity of that woman's gesture speaks volumes. No sign of affection, even the smallest, will ever be forgotten, especially if it is shown to those who are suffering, lonely or in need, as was the Lord at that time.

5. Love for the Lord, then, is one with love for the poor. The same Jesus who tells us, "The poor you will always have with you" (Mt 26:11), also promises the disciples: "I am with you always" (Mt 28:20). We likewise think of his saying: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). This is not a matter of mere human kindness but a revelation: contact with those who are lowly and powerless is a fundamental way of encountering the Lord of history. In the poor, he continues to speak to us.

Saint Francis



6. Pope Francis, explaining his choice of that name, related how, after his election, a Cardinal friend of his embraced him, kissed him and told him: "Do not forget the poor!" [4] It is the same appeal that the leaders of the Church made to Saint Paul when he went up to Jerusalem to confirm his mission (cf. *Gal* 2:1-10). Years later, the Apostle could still reaffirm that this was "actually what I was eager to do" (*Gal* 2:10). Care for the poor was also a great concern of Saint Francis of Assisi: in the person of a leper, Christ himself embraced Francis and changed his life. Even today, Saint Francis, as the Poor Man of Assisi, continues to inspire us by his outstanding example.

7. Eight centuries ago, Saint Francis prompted an evangelical renewal in the Christians and society of his time. Wealthy and self-confident, the young Francis was taken aback and converted by his direct contact with the poor and outcast of society. The story of his life continues to appeal to the minds and hearts of believers, and many non-believers as well. It "changed history." [5] A further step on the same path was taken by the Second Vatican Council, as Saint Paul VI pointed out when he said that "the ancient parable of the Samaritan served as the model for the Council's spirituality." [6] I am convinced that the preferential choice for the poor is a source of extraordinary renewal both for the Church and for society, if we can only set ourselves free of our self-centeredness and open our ears to their cry.

The cry of the poor

8. The passage of Sacred Scripture in which God reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush can serve as a constant starting-point for this effort. There he says: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them... So come, I will send you" (*Ex* 3:7-8,10). [7] God thus shows his concern for the needs of the poor: "When the Israelites cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer" (*Judg* 3:15). In hearing the cry of the poor, we are asked to enter into the heart of God, who is always concerned for the needs of his children, especially those in greatest need. If we remain unresponsive to that cry, the poor might well cry out to the Lord against us, and we would incur guilt (cf. *Deut* 15:9) and turn away from the very heart of God.

9. The condition of the poor is a cry that, throughout human history, constantly challenges our lives, societies, political and economic systems, and, not least, the Church. On the wounded faces of the poor, we see the suffering of the innocent and, therefore, the suffering of Christ himself. At the same time, we should perhaps speak more correctly of the many faces of the poor and of poverty, since it is a multifaceted phenomenon. In fact, there are many forms of poverty: the poverty of those who lack material means of subsistence, the poverty of those who are socially marginalized and lack the means to give voice to their dignity and abilities, moral and spiritual poverty, cultural poverty, the poverty of those who find themselves in a condition of personal or social weakness or fragility, the poverty of those who have no rights, no space, no freedom.

10. In this sense, it can be said that the commitment to the poor and to removing the social and structural causes of poverty has gained importance in recent decades, but it remains insufficient. This is also the case because our societies often favor criteria for orienting life and politics that are marked by numerous inequalities. As a result, the old forms of poverty that we have become aware of and are trying to combat are being joined by new ones, sometimes more subtle and dangerous. From this point of view, it is to be welcomed that the United Nations has made the eradication of poverty one of its Millennium Goals.

11. A concrete commitment to the poor must also be accompanied by a change in mentality that can have an impact at the cultural level. In fact, the illusion of happiness derived from a comfortable life pushes many people towards a vision of life centered on the accumulation of wealth and social success at all



costs, even at the expense of others and by taking advantage of unjust social ideals and political-economic systems that favor the strongest. Thus, in a world where the poor are increasingly numerous, we paradoxically see the growth of a wealthy elite, living in a bubble of comfort and luxury, almost in another world compared to ordinary people. This means that a culture still persists — sometimes well disguised — that discards others without even realizing it and tolerates with indifference that millions of people die of hunger or survive in conditions unfit for human beings. A few years ago, the photo of a lifeless child lying on a Mediterranean beach caused an uproar; unfortunately, apart from some momentary outcry, similar events are becoming increasingly irrelevant and seen as marginal news items.

12. We must not let our guard down when it comes to poverty. We should be particularly concerned about the serious conditions in which many people find themselves due to lack of food and water. In wealthy countries too, the growing numbers of the poor are equally a source of concern. In Europe, more and more families find themselves unable to make it to the end of the month. In general, we are witnessing an increase in different kinds of poverty, which is no longer a single, uniform reality but now involves multiple forms of economic and social impoverishment, reflecting the spread of inequality even in largely affluent contexts. Let us not forget that “doubly poor are those women who endure situations of exclusion, mistreatment and violence, since they are frequently less able to defend their rights. Even so, we constantly witness among them impressive examples of daily heroism in defending and protecting their vulnerable families.” [8] While significant changes are under way in some countries, “the organization of societies worldwide is still far from reflecting clearly that women possess the same dignity and identical rights as men. We say one thing with our words, but our decisions and reality tell another story,” [9] especially if we consider the numbers of women who are in fact destitute.

Ideological prejudices

13. Looking beyond the data — which is sometimes “interpreted” to convince us that the situation of the poor is not so serious — the overall reality is quite evident: “Some economic rules have proved effective for growth, but not for integral human development. Wealth has increased, but together with inequality, with the result that ‘new forms of poverty are emerging.’ The claim that the modern world has reduced poverty is made by measuring poverty with criteria from the past that do not correspond to present-day realities. In other times, for example, lack of access to electric energy was not considered a sign of poverty, nor was it a source of hardship. Poverty must always be understood and gauged in the context of the actual opportunities available in each concrete historical period.” [10] Looking beyond specific situations and contexts, however, a 1984 document of the European Community declared that “‘the poor’ shall be taken to mean persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the Member States in which they live.” [11] Yet if we acknowledge that all human beings have the same dignity, independent of their place of birth, the immense differences existing between countries and regions must not be ignored.

14. The poor are not there by chance or by blind and cruel fate. Nor, for most of them, is poverty a choice. Yet, there are those who still presume to make this claim, thus revealing their own blindness and cruelty. Of course, among the poor there are also those who do not want to work, perhaps because their ancestors, who worked all their lives, died poor. However, there are so many others — men and women — who nonetheless work from dawn to dusk, perhaps collecting scraps or the like, even though they know that their hard work will only help them to scrape by, but never really improve their lives. Nor can it be said that most of the poor are such because they do not “deserve” otherwise, as maintained by that specious view of meritocracy that sees only the successful as “deserving.”



15. Christians too, on a number of occasions, have succumbed to attitudes shaped by secular ideologies or political and economic approaches that lead to gross generalizations and mistaken conclusions. The fact that some dismiss or ridicule charitable works, as if they were an obsession on the part of a few and not the burning heart of the Church's mission, convinces me of the need to go back and re-read the Gospel, lest we risk replacing it with the wisdom of this world. The poor cannot be neglected if we are to remain within the great current of the Church's life that has its source in the Gospel and bears fruit in every time and place.

[1] Francis, Encyclical Letter *Dilexit Nos* (24 October 2024), 170: AAS 116 (2024), 1422.

[2] Ibid., 171: AAS 116 (2024), 1422-1423.

[3] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (19 March 2018), 96: AAS 110 (2018), 1137.

[4] Francis, *Audience with Representatives of the Communications Media* (16 March 2013): AAS 105 (2013), 381.

[5] J. Bergoglio - A. Skorka, *Sobre el cielo y la tierra*, Buenos Aires 2013, 214.

[6] Paul VI, *Homily at the Mass for the Last Public Session of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council* (7 December 1965): AAS 58 (1966), 55-56.

[7] Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 187: AAS 105 (2013), 1098.

[8] Ibid., 212: AAS 105 (2013), 1108.

[9] Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (3 October 2020), 23: AAS 112 (2020), 977.

[10] Ibid., 21: AAS 112 (2020), 976.

[11] Council of the European Communities, *Decision (85/8/EEC) on Specific Community Action to Combat Poverty* (19 December 1984), Art. 1(2): *Official Journal of the European Communities*, No. L 2/24.