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Love that Calls: Theological and Pastoral Insights from Pope Francis’ Encyclical “*Dilexit nos*”

Abstract: This article analyzes the main themes of the encyclical *Dilexit nos* and their connections to contemporary pastoral insights within today’s cultural context. In the encyclical *Dilexit nos*, Pope Francis reopens the theological and pastoral significance of the Heart of Christ for the life of the Church. The article discusses the Heart of Christ as the center of divine and human love, presenting God’s love not as an abstract idea but as a concrete call to communion, mercy, and synodal walking together. According to Pope Francis, the heart is the place where sincerity is born; only the heart creates closeness between people; love is the core of reality.

Keywords: Love, The Heart of Christ, Pope Francis, *Dilexit nos*.

Introduction

Pope Francis’ encyclical *Dilexit nos* offers a profound theological and pastoral reflection on the Sacred Heart of Jesus as the center of divine and human love. It is a powerful document calling for a renewal of devotional practices to the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ¹. Devotion to the Sacred Heart DeLorenzo (2024) identifies as the heart of the encyclical.

The document reclaims the symbol of the heart as a vital anthropological and spiritual reality, countering modern tendencies toward fragmentation and superficiality. It presents the heart as the locus of sincerity, intimacy, and authentic human identity². The encyclical emphasizes that “His open heart has gone before us and waits for us, unconditionally”³, inviting a renewed encounter with Christ’s

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¹ J.C.L. Imanaka, *Heart-Centered Discernment in Leadership: Pope Francis’s Teachings in Dilexit Nos*, “Journal of Management for Global Sustainability” 13(2025), no. 2, p. 4.

² Francis, *Dilexit nos*, Rome, October 24, 2024, no. 5 (cited as: DN).

³ DN 1.

love. Theologically, the heart is shown as the unifying center of the person, where love integrates reason, will, and emotion. The encyclical asserts that “only the heart creates intimacy, true closeness between two persons”⁴, and that “the inmost core of reality is love”⁵. This vision undergirds the Church’s synodal journey, where love becomes a dynamic force for communion and mission. “Reconciliation and peace are also born of the heart”⁶, making the Sacred Heart a model for ecclesial and social renewal. The encyclical challenges the Church to embody a heart-centered spirituality that listens, welcomes, and heals. Ultimately, *Dilexit nos* calls for a transformation of hearts as the path to personal and communal salvation.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the theological and pastoral insights of Pope Francis’ encyclical *Dilexit nos*, highlighting the importance of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the spiritual renewal of contemporary humanity and the strengthening of Church communion, through a personal relationship with Christ, as the foundation of the Church’s communion and a symbol of love.

The Heart of Christ as a Pedagogy of Love

The encyclical *Dilexit nos* presents the Heart of Christ as the theological and existential center from which the Church’s mission springs; in other words, the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus as a pastoral key that helps us understand the Christian vocation in the modern world. Today, as society experiences fragmentation, polarization, and existential fatigue, Pope Francis invites us to return to the source that alone can restore human connection—to God’s love, which reaches out to us first and calls us to respond. The encyclical, whose title means “He loved us”, draws on the traditions of John and Paul to emphasize the primacy of divine love in the life of the Church and the believer⁷. Thus, the Pope urges a return to the heart as the center of the encounter between humanity and God.

The encyclical begins with a powerful affirmation of Christ’s love: “His open heart has gone before us and waits for us, unconditionally, asking only to offer us his love and friendship”⁸. This statement sums up the document’s central message: the initiative of divine love, which precedes and sustains every human response. Drawing on Sacred Scripture, Pope Francis places the Sacred Heart within the broader narrative of salvation, quoting: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor

⁴ DN 12.

⁵ DN 16.

⁶ DN 28.

⁷ A. Di Bussolo, ‘He Loved Us’: Pope Francis’ new encyclical on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, 24 October 24, 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-10/he-loved-us-the-pope-s-encyclical-on-the-sacred-heart.html> (accessed: Jan 5, 2026).

⁸ DN 1.

any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:37-39), to emphasize the indissoluble bond between Christ and humanity.

Theologically, the Heart of Jesus is not merely a symbol but a sacramental reality “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 fulfilment to which humanity can aspire. There, in that heart, we truly come at last to know ourselves and we learn how to love”⁹. The Sacred Heart becomes the place where divine transcendence meets human vulnerability, offering a model of love that is both affective and effective.

God’s plan of revelation is manifested in reality through “works and words that are closely intertwined”¹⁰ and shed light on one another. It has its own divine pedagogy: God reveals Himself to man gradually, preparing him in distinct stages to receive His own supernatural Revelation, the culmination of which is the Person and mission of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ¹¹.

Upon closer examination of the text of the encyclical, one can observe that the Heart of Christ is presented not only as an object of devotion, but as God’s pedagogy, in which love becomes the principle of knowledge and action. Love here can be understood as:

- Proactive—God takes the first step toward humanity and “reminds us of the essential message of the Christian faith: God loves humanity first”¹²... because “he loved us first” (1 Jn 4:10).
- Incarnate—love becomes visible in Christ: “The image of the Lord’s heart speaks to us in fact of a threefold love. First, we contemplate his infinite divine love. Then our thoughts turn to the spiritual dimension of his humanity, in which the heart is “the symbol of that most ardent love which, infused into his soul, enriches his human will”. Finally, “it is a symbol also of his sensible love”. These three loves are not separate, parallel or disconnected, but together act and find expression in a constant and vital unity. For “by faith, through which we believe that the human and divine nature were united in the Person of Christ, we can see the closest bonds between the tender love of the physical heart of Jesus and the twofold spiritual love, namely human and divine”¹³. “Through Jesus, we have come to know and believe in the love God has for us” (1 Jn 4, 16).
- Transformative—it changes a person’s relationship with themselves, others, and the world. The Pope notes that: “It is only by starting from the heart that our communities will succeed in uniting and reconciling differing minds

⁹ DN 30.

¹⁰ Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic constitution on divine revelation: Dei verbum*, no. 2.

¹¹ *Katalikų Bažnyčios katekizmas*, Vilnius 2015, no. 53, <https://katekizmas.lt> (accessed: Jan 8, 2026).

¹² DN 1

¹³ DN 65; 66.

and wills, so that the Spirit can guide us in unity as brothers and sisters. Reconciliation and peace are also born of the heart. The heart of Christ is “ecstasy”, openness, gift and encounter. In that heart, we learn to relate to one another in wholesome and happy ways, and to build up in this world God’s kingdom of love and justice. Our hearts, united with the heart of Christ, are capable of working this social miracle”¹⁴. Taking the heart seriously, then, has consequences for society as a whole. The Second Vatican Council teaches that, “every one of us needs a change of heart; we must set our gaze on the whole world and look to those tasks we can all perform together in order to bring about the betterment of our race”¹⁵. For “the imbalances affecting the world today are in fact a symptom of a deeper imbalance rooted in the human heart”¹⁶. In pondering the tragedies afflicting our world, the Council urges us to return to the heart. It explains that human beings “by their interior life, transcend the entire material universe; they experience this deep interiority when they enter into their own heart, where God, who probes the heart, awaits them, and where they decide their own destiny in the sight of God”¹⁷.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons has spoken on numerous occasions about this divine pedagogy, describing it as a drawing together of God and humanity. The Word of God took up residence in man and became the Son of Man, so that it might be natural for man to receive God, and for God to take up residence in man, when it pleases the Father¹⁸.

The Pope notes that: „We need once more to take up the word of God and to realize, in doing so, that our best response to the love of Christ’s heart is to love our brothers and sisters. There is no greater way for us to return love for love. The Scriptures make this patently clear: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (Gal 5:14). “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death” (1 Jn 3:14). “Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 Jn 4:20)¹⁹. This pedagogy or maybe better to say educational approach is particularly relevant today, when people often feel unwanted, invisible, or unaccepted.

¹⁴ DN 28.

¹⁵ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes*, no. 82.

¹⁶ Ibidem, no. 10.

¹⁷ Ibidem, no. 82; 14.

¹⁸ *Katalikų Bažnyčios katekizmas*, Vilnius 2015, no. 53, <https://katekizmas.lt> (accessed: Jan 8, 2026).

¹⁹ DN 167.

The Heart as Anthropological and Spiritual Center

A central contribution of *Dilexit nos* is its retrieval of the heart as an anthropological category. Pope Francis traces the concept of the heart from classical Greek thought to biblical revelation, noting that “the heart appears as the locus of desire and the place where important decisions take shape”²⁰. The heart is not merely an emotional center but the integrative core of the human person, uniting reason, will, and affectivity. The Pope laments the modern neglect of the heart, observing that “the heart has been ignored in anthropology”²¹. He critiques a rationalistic and individualistic culture that devalues interiority and relationality. In contrast, the heart is portrayed as the place of authenticity: “The heart is the locus of sincerity, where deceit and disguise have no place”²². It is in the heart that one encounters the truth of oneself and others. This anthropological vision culminates in the assertion that “I am my heart, for my heart is what sets me apart, shapes my spiritual identity and puts me in communion with other people”²³. Heidegger’s claim that philosophy begins with “deep emotion”²⁴ supports Francis’ argument that the heart is the starting point of authentic human experience. The heart is thus the site of personal identity, moral discernment, and spiritual communion.

Love as Synodal and Social Dynamism

The encyclical connects the theology of the heart with the Church’s synodal journey. Love, rooted in the heart of Christ, becomes the animating force of synodality. “Reconciliation and peace are also born of the heart”²⁵ Pope Francis writes, emphasizing that true communion arises not from uniformity but from heartfelt encounter and mutual recognition. In a world marked by division and polarization, the heart offers a path to unity. The Pope warns against a “society dominated by narcissism and self-centeredness” that becomes “heartless”²⁶. The heart, by contrast, enables authentic relationships and openness to the divine: “Only the heart creates intimacy, true closeness between two persons”²⁷. This vision extends to the social and political realm. Citing the Second Vatican Council, the encyclical affirms that “the imbalances affecting the world today are in fact a symptom of a deeper imbalance rooted in the human heart”²⁸. The transformation of society, therefore, begins with the conversion of hearts. The message of the encyclical is in line with the direction of the synodal process: the

²⁰ DN 3.

²¹ DN 10.

²² DN 167.

²³ DN 14.

²⁴ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Stambaugh, New York 1996, p. 87.

²⁵ DN 28.

²⁶ DN 17.

²⁷ DN 12.

²⁸ DN 29.

Church is called to be not an institution that observes from a distance, but a community that accompanies, heals, and inspires. In the encyclical, Pope Francis emphasizes that synodality is not a method or a structure—it is a dynamic of love.

Pastoral Implications Today

The pastoral dimension of *Dilexit nos* is grounded in the example of Christ, whose love is expressed in concrete gestures. Jesus “came to meet us, bridging all distances”²⁹, embodying a closeness that heals and restores. His actions—touching the sick, forgiving sinners, and listening to the marginalized—reveal a heart moved by compassion. Pope Francis challenges the Church to imitate this pastoral style, emphasizing that “God does not love us with words; he comes forth to meet us and, by his closeness, he shows us the depth of his tender love”³⁰. This approach calls for a Church that listens “with the heart,” welcomes the wounded, and offers the warmth of divine mercy. The encyclical also addresses the spiritual life, drawing from the Ignatian tradition. The heart is the place where God’s desire meets human desire, initiating a process of conversion: “This is the start of a new process of ‘setting our life in order’, beginning with the heart”³¹. In interpreting *Dilexit nos*, de Bertolis has suggested that Francis lays out a vision for “a spirituality for the future”³² that will help us to overcome the individualism of our era. Spiritual growth is deeply emotional, driven by a desire to serve others for the greater good.

Conclusion

The encyclical *Dilexit nos* offers the Church and the world a path to renewal that begins in the heart—in God’s love, which calls, heals, and sends forth. This message is relevant not only in theological discourse but also in pastoral practice, where love becomes the true criterion for the Church’s action. *Dilexit nos* is a timely and profound meditation on the centrality of love in Christian life. By reclaiming the heart as the anthropological and theological center of the person, Pope Francis offers a vision of the Church as a community of hearts united in Christ. The Sacred Heart emerges as both symbol and source of a renewed ecclesial and social ethos, one marked by compassion, intimacy, and reconciliation. In a world increasingly fragmented and impersonal, the encyclical calls for a return to the heart as the path to authentic humanity and divine communion. As

²⁹ DN 34.

³⁰ DN 36.

³¹ DN 24.

³² O. de Bertolis, 2024. “*Dilexit nos*” *The new encyclical of Pope Francis. La Civiltà Cattolica*, December 27, 2024, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/dilexit-nos-the-newencyclical-of-pope-francis/> (accessed: Jan 8, 2026).

the Pope Francis concludes, “our world... may regain the most important and necessary thing of all: its heart”.

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