

Dilexit Nos: ‘On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ’

“He loved us”, Saint Paul says of Christ (cf. *Rom* 8:37), in order to make us realise that nothing can ever “separate us” from that love (*Rom* 8:39).’ With these quotations, Pope Francis opens his new encyclical letter on the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, *Dilexit Nos*. (Those Latin words translate simply as ‘He loved us’: as always with magisterial documents, the title comes from the opening words.) The Pope’s fourth encyclical, promulgated on 24 October 2024, it is subtitled ‘On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ’. We will start with some introduction and background, then in the coming time reflect on its teachings in more detail.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart can be clearly traced back to at least the eleventh century, and is seen in the spirituality of St Bernard (1090-1153), St Bonaventure (1221-74) and St Gertrude the Great (1256-1302). Indeed, the beginnings of a devotion toward the love of God as symbolised by the heart of Jesus are found already in the Fathers of the Church. It was especially set forth by French priest St John Eudes (1601-80), and through his efforts the first liturgical feast of the Sacred Heart was celebrated locally in 1670, in Rennes, France.

But it was the revelations to the French Visitation nun St Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-90) at Paray-le-Monial in Burgundy that had the most influence. From 1673 to 1675 she received several visions of Christ, manifesting his Sacred Heart and asking that this devotion be propagated. Among its specific features were to be the Communion of reparation especially on the First Friday of each month (because of Jesus’ Passion on Good Friday); the Holy Hour, especially on Thursdays in union with the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane on Holy Thursday; and the request for the establishment of a universal Feast of the Sacred Heart.

Supported by her confessor, Jesuit priest St Claude de La Colombière (1641-82), Sr Margaret Mary persevered in the face of opposition, until the devotion was accepted in her convent and gradually spread. The Jesuits especially continued to propagate it. In 1856 Pope Bl. Pius IX extended the feast to the universal Church, and on 11th June 1899 Pope Leo XIII consecrated the entire human race to the Sacred Heart, with the consecration being recited in churches around the world. Margaret Mary was canonised on 13th May 1920 by Pope Benedict XV.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* briefly sums up the heart of the doctrine and devotion of the Sacred Heart in these words: ‘Jesus knew and loved us each and all during his life, his agony and his Passion and gave himself up for each one of us: “The Son of God...loved me and gave himself for me.” (*Gal* 2:20) He has loved us all with a human heart. For this reason, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation, (cf. *Jn* 19:34) “is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that...love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings” without exception.’ (*Catechism* 478, its final quote coming from Pius XII, *Haurietis aquas*, DS 3924)

‘The prayer of the Church venerates and honours the Heart of Jesus just as it invokes his most holy name. It adores the incarnate Word and his Heart which, out of love for men, he allowed to be pierced by our sins.’ (*Catechism* 2669)

Pope Francis places *Dilexit Nos* in the tradition of three previous encyclicals on the Sacred Heart: *Annum Sacrum* of Leo XIII (1899), *Miserentissimus Redemptor* of Pius XI (1928) and *Haurietis Aquas* of Venerable Pius XII (1956), and draws upon all three; and also, extensively,

on the more recent teachings of St John Paul II. St Paul VI, Benedict XVI and the Second Vatican Council are also quoted.

Annum Sacrum was for the 1899 Consecration of the Human Race to the Sacred Heart; *Miserentissimus Redemptor* focused on *reparation* to the Sacred Heart; and *Haurietis Aquas* ('You will draw water'), going more deeply into the theology and spirituality of the devotion, marked the centenary of the extension of the Feast of the Sacred Heart to the universal Church in 1856. *Dilexit Nos*, however, is longer than all three put together. As Pope Francis indicated when he announced the encyclical in June, it is occasioned by the 350th anniversary of the revelations to St Margaret Mary, which lasted from 27 December 1673 until June 1675, and which the Church is currently celebrating these 18 months (27 December 2023 – 27 June 2025).

Dilexit Nos draws above all from Sacred Scripture, but also very extensively from the writings and experiences of many Saints. We can mention especially St Margaret Mary, St Claude de La Colombière, St Ignatius Loyola, St Francis de Sales, St Charles de Foucauld and St Therese of Lisieux. Also notable are St Augustine, St Bernard, St Bonaventure, St John of the Cross, St Vincent de Paul and St John Henry Newman.

It also references, at least briefly: from the ancient Fathers and Saints – St Ignatius of Antioch, St Justin, St Irenaeus, St Basil, St Gregory of Elvira, St Ambrose, St Jerome, St John Chrysostom and St John Damascene; from the Middle Ages – St Lutgarde, St Thomas Aquinas, St Mechtilde, St Angela of Foligno, St Gertrude and Saint Catherine of Siena; the Jesuits – St Peter Faber, St Francis Borgia and St Alphonsus Rodriguez; and moving towards modern centuries – St John Eudes, St Daniel Comboni, St Józef Sebastian Pelczar, St Faustina Kowalska, St Pius of Pietrelcina and St Teresa of Calcutta.

The Encyclical has five chapters: Chapter One, 'The importance of the heart'; Chapter Two, 'Actions and words of love' (*reflecting on the love of Christ as found in the Gospels*); Chapter Three, 'This is the Heart that has loved so greatly' (*the Church's reflection on the Sacred Heart*); Chapter Four, 'A love that gives itself as drink' (*on personal spiritual experience*); and Chapter Five, 'Love for love' (*on communal missionary commitment*).

Given the rich abundance of its teaching, I do commend it to your own reading, despite its length. To quote its own words: 'Let us turn...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. In the end, that Sacred Heart is the unifying principle of all reality, since Christ is the heart of the world, and the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection is the centre of history...' (30-31)

The Holy Father concludes the encyclical with words of faith in the boundless power and love of the Most Sacred Heart. He writes (219-220): '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. I ask our Lord Jesus Christ to grant that his Sacred Heart may continue to pour forth the streams of living water that can heal the hurt we have caused, strengthen our ability to love and serve others, and inspire us to journey together towards a just, solidary and fraternal world. Until that day when we will rejoice in celebrating together the banquet of the heavenly kingdom in the presence of the risen Lord, who harmonises all our differences in the light that radiates perpetually from his open heart. May he be blessed forever.'