La Salle and the education of the poor in ‘Dilexi Te’, Pope Leo XIV’s first apostolic exhortation

Signed on 4 October – the day on which the Church celebrates St Francis, the *poverello* of Assisi – Pope Leo XIV’s first apostolic exhortation was made public on 8 October. **It is an exhortation** “**on the Church’s care for the poor and with the poor, entitled *‘Dilexi Te,*** imagining that Christ was addressing each one of them, saying: you have no power or strength, but ‘I have loved you’ (*Rev* 3:9)”, as the Pope himself states.

Dilexi te offers a profound reflection “**on love for the poor**“ throughout its five chapters and 121 sections, emphasising that “God chooses the poor” and underlining that ours is “a Church for the poor”, with all the challenges that this implies.

A “two-handed“ exhortation
The text had been prepared by Pope Francis in the last months of his life“. I am happy to make this document my own – adding some reflections – and to issue 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.” (*DT* 3), explains Pope Leo XIV.

“The publication of *Dilexi Te*, written jointly by Popes Francis and Leo, is timely”, comments Brother Carlos Gómez, Vicar General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. “The current circumstances of the world, the proliferation of egos in the political context, **the contempt for those who ‘live on the margins’, the cancellation of humanitarian aid by some ‘rich’ countries, the human drama of the victims of wars and exclusion are some of the issues addressed in this prophetic document,** with a strong Latin American theological flavour”, he claims.

“Clearly inspired by the history of the Church’s commitment to those who best represent the face of Jesus Christ, the poor, it is a call to the conscience of

humanity, to governments, to social, political and cultural organisations and, of course, to religious congregations", continues Brother Carlos. It is not for nothing **that the Pope traces the history of consecrated life to illustrate how God has shown his preferential love for those who live on the peripheries, in exclusion and poverty**".

Education, an act of justice and faith

In fact, when referring to the education of the poor (cf. chapter three), the Pope emphasises that this **has been** "**an act of justice and faith**", **and** "**this mission took shape in the founding of congregations dedicated to education**" (*DT* 68), such as ours, with a particular sensitivity to the poorest and excluded, as mentioned by Br. Armin Luistro, Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian School: "Profoundly touched by God's unconditional love for each one and deeply moved by the condition of their sisters and brothers in societies' peripheries, **Lasallians collaborate with all women and men of good will to transform our world and recreate societal structures in accordance with God's dream** for humanity and all of creation".

Specifically, when referring to Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the Lasallian Mission in No. 69 of *Dilexi Te*, the Pope says:

> ***"Saint John Baptist de La Salle, realizing the injustice caused by the exclusion of the children of workers and ordinary people from the educational system of France a t that time, founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the seventeenth century, with the ideal of offering them free education, solid formation, and a fraternal environment. De La Salle saw the classroom as a place for human development, but also for conversion. In his colleges, prayer, method, discipline and sharing were combined. Each child was considered a unique gift from God, and the act of teaching was a service to the Kingdom of God". (DT 69)***

In response to this exceptional recognition of the Lasallian tradition of education for the poor, Brother Armin Luistro expresses his gratitude to the Pontiff, stressing that, in fact, "for close to 350 years, the Brothers and Lasallians have sought to create inclusive spaces where the young and the poor may gain access to quality educational programmes that open doors to Jesus' promise of fullness of life".

In fact, Brother Armin adds, “today, we may count more than a thousand educational centres serving more than a million students in around eighty countries worldwide. In response to this unique recognition of the Lasallian tradition of education for the poor, Brother Armin Luistro expressed his gratitude to the Pontiff, emphasising that, in fact, “for almost 350 years, the Brothers and Armin Luistro expressed his gratitude to the Pontiff, emphasising that, in fact, ‘for almost 350 years, the Brothers and Lasallians have sought to create inclusive spaces where young people and the poor can access quality educational programmes that open the doors to Jesus’ promise of a full life’.

In fact, Brother Armin adds, “today, we have more than a thousand educational centres serving more than a million students in some eighty countries around the world. These centres are not only places to learn useful skills and life skills that enable graduates to succeed in the world, escape poverty, or leave behind a lasting legacy. Lasallian schools are also channels of God’s grace, where the educational community experiences God’s saving presence and learns to cultivate in their hearts the zeal to continue Jesus’ saving action for those who are far from salvation”.

The Pope’s mention of Saint John Baptist de La Salle “is also a call to us Lasallians and a wake-up call to **reread, evaluate and enrich our explicit vow of association for the educational service of the** poor”, notes the Brother Vicar General.

Similarly, Brother Peter Ryan, Procurator General of the Institute, believes that “Pope Leo XIV’s words remind the Lasallian Family (Brothers and Partners) that their work is not only educational, but also a vital part of the Church’s mission”. Thus, the special mention of the Lasallian Mission and the education of the poor is “a big moment for the Brothers of the Christian Schools and for the entire Lasallian Family. It showed that **the Pope recognises and values what the Brothers and their Partners have been doing since the time of Saint John Baptist de La Salle:** giving young people, especially the poor, a chance for a better life through education rooted in faith”.

An honour and a challenge

“For the Institute, this papal mention is both an honour and a challenge”, adds Brother Peter. “It is an honour because it confirms that its mission remains very important to the Church today. And it is a challenge because it calls the Brothers

and Lasallian Partners to keep that mission alive in today's world: to stay faithful to their founding spirit, to keep reaching out to those most in need, and **to make sure their schools and other educational and welfare works are places where faith, service, and community, truly come together**".

Furthermore, "when Pope Leo XIV says that teaching the poor has been an act of justice and faith, he reminds us that **helping those in need through education is one of the Church's most powerful ways of living the Gospel**", says the Brother Procurator General.

Education and social justice

That is why "the Brothers, together with the entire Lasallian Family, continue this mission today. **Across the world, they run schools and educational programmes for young people who have few opportunities: children from poor families, refugees, and those living in difficult situations**". Likewise, "in higher education, they lead universities and colleges that prepare young adults to become responsible, compassionate leaders, committed to justice and service", recalls Brother Peter. "Their teaching goes beyond the academic; it also forms hearts, teaches respect, faith and care for others".

In this sense, "**for Lasallians, the commitment to the poor and the building of social justice through education is indissoluble**", emphasises Brother Carlos. "Of course, not just any education, but one that emancipates, that gives wings to fly high and look far, that opens the doors of inclusion and opportunity; not poor education for the poor, but, as the Pope says, 'teaching the poor affirms their value, giving them the tools to transform their reality (…). Christian education does not form only professionals, but also people open to goodness, beauty and truth" (*DT* 72). That is why the Catholic school becomes a space for inclusion, integral formation and human promotion. Thus, by combining faith and culture, we sow the future, honour the image of God and build a better society", concludes the Vicar General of the Institute.