

**'I HAVE LOVED YOU' (Rev. 3:9)**

**Cistercian poverty in the light of the Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te* from Pope Leo XIV**

**Circular letter 2026**

Brothers and Sisters,

I am beginning this circular letter while travelling among our Nigerian monasteries. During Advent I resolved to read the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Leo XIV on love for the poor, for do we not celebrate in Advent and Christmas the mystery that Christ became poor for our sake? Saint Paul writes to the Christians of Corinth: “*For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich*” (2 Cor 8:9).

Pope Leo quotes these words of St. Paul in no. 18 of his apostolic exhortation *Dilixit te*, published on October 4, 2025:

The Old Testament history of God’s preferential love for the poor and his readiness to hear their cry — to which I have briefly alluded — comes to fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth. By his Incarnation, he “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Phil 2:7), and in that form he brought us salvation. His was a radical poverty, grounded in his mission to reveal fully God’s love for us (cf. Jn 1:18; 1 Jn 4:9). As he puts it in his customarily brief but striking manner : “You know well the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).<sup>1</sup>

In this paragraph, Pope Leo combines the concepts of poverty and humility, two concepts that were close to the hearts of our Fathers of Cîteaux. Thus, the *Carta Caritatis* Prior calls out that “They must maintain one rule, one order, and the same observance: in food and clothing, in poverty and humility, in everything without exception”.<sup>2</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx goes one step further by warning that “Outward poverty, if not borne with humility of heart, easily turns into pride”.<sup>3</sup>

Reflecting on poverty and caring for the poor brings us not only back to the Fathers of Citeaux but—and this is perhaps even more important—to the heart of the Gospel, to the Heart of Jesus Christ himself. This apostolic exhortation by Pope Leo XIV cannot therefore be viewed separately from the thoughts of his beloved predecessor Pope Francis. It was Pope Francis who began this exhortation but was unable to finish it. There is a clear connection with Pope Francis’ last encyclical, dated October 24, 2024, entitled *Dilexit nos, on the Human and Divine love of the Heart of Jesus Christ*. In that encyclical, he shows that humility and poverty belong together and must not be separated. “Made poor in spirit, we draw closer to the poor, those who are dearest to God.”<sup>4</sup> “Once our hearts

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<sup>1</sup> The English translation of *Dilexi te* that is used in this circular letter can be found on:

[https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html)

<sup>2</sup> *Carta Caritatis* Prior, cap. 3. Unam regulam, unum ordinem, eandemque observantiam in cibo et vestitu, in paupertate et humilitate, in omnibus omnino rebus teneant, in: J-B Van Damme (ed.), *Les plus anciennes textes de Citeaux*, ASOC 9 (1953), p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Speculum caritatis*, I, 25: Exterior paupertas, nisi humilitate cordis fulciatur, facile in superbiam vertitur.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Dilexit nos*, 190.

welcome the love of Christ in complete trust, and enable its fire to spread in our lives, we become capable of loving others as Christ did, in humility and closeness to all.”<sup>5</sup>

It goes without saying that the theme of poverty and humility is also of great value to us as Cistercians in a Church and a world in which it is not easy to be “poor with the poor Christ”.<sup>6</sup>

### I. Reasons for this circular letter

This circular letter invites all communities to take up *Dilexi te*, to meditate on it together, and to translate it into concrete forms of life. It is also a call to embody anew the intuition of our Fathers: *to be poor with the poor Christ*, or in the words of Pope Leo:

That is why we must feel bound to invite everyone to share in the light and life born of recognizing Christ in the faces of the suffering and those in need. Love for the poor is an essential element of the history of God’s dealings with us; it rises up from the heart of the Church as a constant appeal to the hearts of the faithful, both individually and in our communities....Consequently, love for the poor – whatever the form their poverty may take – is the evangelical hallmark of a Church faithful to the heart of God.<sup>7</sup>

Another reason for this circular letter is to respond to Pope Leo’s call not to become or remain indifferent to the poor, but that our evangelical experience of poverty must 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.<sup>8</sup>

Do we dare, as monks and nuns, to look into the mirror of these words?

Furthermore, I hope to make you all more sensitive to the theme of inequality in our Order between those who are rich and those who are poor. This is a theme to which I have referred many times and which, in my opinion, deserves more attention, not only at the level of the Order and the Regional Conferences, but also in the communities. This inequality is not only related to an abundance or a lack of financial resources.

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.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Dilexit nos*, 203.

<sup>6</sup> Exordium Parvum, cap. 15, in: Chrysogonus Waddell, Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux, Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses, 1999, p. 405–406. Eligentes sibi locum solitarium, pauperem et ab hominum habitatione remotum, ut ibi pauperem Christum pauperes sequerentur.

<sup>7</sup> *Dilexit te*, 103.

<sup>8</sup> *idem*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> *idem*, 9.

These different forms of poverty can arise both within communities and between communities. Do we, as monks and nuns, dare to look again in the mirror of these words?

Finally, this letter hopes to inspire a renewed commitment to care for the poor, not as an additional and accidental activity but as a humble and evangelical way of life, rooted in solidarity and love, or in the words of Pope Leo:

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.<sup>10</sup>

## II. Care for the poor in monastic life

This circular letter does not aim to provide a complete overview or summary of the text of the apostolic exhortation. I simply wish to focus on the paragraphs that relate to caring for the poor in monastic life and, from there, examine how poverty and humility can also be inspiring concepts for us today, helping us in our ongoing conversion to Christ.<sup>11</sup>

What interests us most, and perhaps surprises us somewhat, are the six paragraphs (53-58) that Pope Leo devotes in the third chapter of *Dilexit te* to a Church for the poor, explicitly addressing the care of the poor in monastic life.

According to the Pope, monastic life, which has its origins in the silence of the desert, was from the beginning a “witness to solidarity”. “Monks and nuns left everything — wealth, prestige, family — not only because they despised worldly goods — *contemptus mundi* — but also to encounter the poor Christ in this radical detachment”.<sup>12</sup> He begins by referring to the example of St. Basil, for whom St. Benedict showed great respect in his Rule and gave him the title of “our Holy Father”.<sup>13</sup> St. Basil linked care for the poor to the work that monks had to do “because in order to have enough to help the needy... it is clear that we must work diligently... This way of life is profitable not only for subduing the body, but also for charity towards our neighbor, so that through us God may provide enough for our weaker brothers and sisters”.<sup>14</sup>

In the following three paragraphs, Pope Leo speaks about the witness of St. Benedict and his followers. Here he emphasizes welcoming the poor and pilgrims. “The poor and pilgrims are to be received with all care and hospitality, for it is in them that Christ is received.”<sup>15</sup> The Pope characterizes Benedictine care for the poor with the following words: “Sharing,... caring,... and listening... prepared them to welcome Christ who comes in the person of the poor and the stranger. Today, Benedictine monastic hospitality remains a sign of a Church that opens its doors, welcomes without asking, and heals without demanding anything in return”.<sup>16</sup>

The above explanation of the Benedictine charism is perhaps not surprising. In number 56, however, the Pope surprises us with the statement: “Over time, Benedictine monasteries became places for

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<sup>10</sup> *idem*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> The guide prepared by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on the occasion of the presentation of the exhortation offers a good introduction to the text of *Dilexit te*. Instead of attempting to summarize the entire exhortation here, you will find the useful guide attached to this circular letter.

<sup>12</sup> *Dilexit te*, 53.

<sup>13</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 73:5.

<sup>14</sup> *Dilexit te*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 53:15; *Dilexit te*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> *Dilexit te*, 55.

overcoming the culture of exclusion".<sup>17</sup> Here, too, there is a connection between monastic work (agriculture, food production, medicine making) and care for the poor. "Their silent work was the leaven of a new civilization, where the poor were not a problem to be solved, but brothers and sisters to be welcomed".<sup>18</sup> In this way, "an economy of solidarity" was created "in contrast to the logic of accumulation".<sup>19</sup>

In the last number (58), Pope Leo refers to St. Bernard.

For him, compassion was not an option, but the true path of following Christ. Monastic life, therefore, if faithful to its original vocation, shows that the Church is fully the bride of the Lord only when she is also the sister of the poor. The cloister is not only a refuge from the world, but a school where one learns to serve it better. Where monks and nuns have opened their doors to the poor, the Church has revealed with humility and firmness that contemplation does not exclude mercy but demands it as its purest fruit".<sup>20</sup>

Three monastic witnesses, Basil, Benedict, and Bernard, are held up as examples of the monastic church that chooses for the poor. A choice that is connected to the work of our hands (Basil), with hospitality through sharing, caring, and listening (Benedict). This creates a new culture, not of exclusion but of an economy of solidarity in contrast to the logic of accumulating goods. Finally, this choice for the poor in monastic life is deepened by a spiritual teaching of compassion and humility (Bernard) that makes the contemplative life a sister to the poor. Let us zoom in on these characteristics of the monastic church and their possible meaning for us today.

### **Care for the poor and the work of our hands**

St. Basil establishes the connection between the work of our hands and caring for the poor. The monks in the desert were already familiar with this principle. Abba Agathon is a good example of this. In saying 27, it is said of him:

Once, when he went to sell some goods in the city, he saw a stranger lying in the street. He was sick and had no one to care for him. The old man stayed with him and rented a small house. He paid the rent from the work of his hands, and whatever was left over, he spent on the needs of the sick man. And he stayed there for four months, until the sick man was healed. Then the old father returned in peace to his cell.

In the collected sayings on charity, we also find a saying of Abba Agathon:

*Abba Agathon said, "When I work with my hands, I use what I earn to give alms. For I know that this pleases God. What I do with my hands, I do so that I may have something to give to the poor; for I consider this my prayer".*

Work, care for the poor, and prayer come together here.

It is this aspect of our manual labor that we also find in our Constitutions. The rich text of C. 26 says, among other things:

This hard and redeeming work is a means of providing a livelihood for the brothers/sisters and for other people, especially the poor. It expresses solidarity with all workers.

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<sup>17</sup> *idem*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> *idem*, 56.

<sup>19</sup> *idem*, 56.

<sup>20</sup> *idem*, 58.

Yet we may wonder to what extent this aspect of our work still plays a role in our attitude toward work today. In many communities, the need to earn a daily living is central, and people struggle to keep their heads above water. They are content with what they earn through the work of their own hands, and they share what little they have to the best of their ability. Care for oneself is central to manual labor.

Other communities, on the other hand, do little or no work to earn a living because of old age or other circumstances. In many cases, they are able to live off the returns on capital accumulated through the work of previous generations or they live from the work others are doing in their name. They often share out of an abundance for which, however, they themselves no longer have to do anything today. Sharing is central, but it comes from something that they themselves have not earned or no longer earn.

Care for the poor leads us to reflect on the purpose of our daily work. Yet it is true that monks and nuns do not work solely in order to support the poor. Care for the poor does not begin with giving, but with sharing the same bread or sharing in the same simple work. Fortunately, I know examples of communities that do something extra beyond what is asked of them in their work. For example, they bake additional bread for the poor in their immediate surroundings. This requires extra effort on their part, in addition to the work they already do to earn their own living, but they consider it important as a witness of solidarity with the poor—not only in giving, but also in solidarity with those who have to work hard, and even harder, for their daily bread. For this community—and there are many other such examples—this is “the concrete love that is the criterion for holiness”, according to Saint Basil.

At this point, in this year in which we commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the death of our Blessed Brothers of Tibhirine, we cannot ignore what Blessed Christian de Chergé said on the relationship between the Cistercian life and the care for the poor.<sup>21</sup> He teaches us that monks do not work with their hands in order to support the poor, but in order to be poor with the poor, and that only from this shared condition can true care for others arise. Being poor with the poor through our work, places us within the living conditions of those who must labor daily for their bread.

Christian de Chergé repeatedly insisted that the monks’ vocation was not primarily to do something for the poor, but to be with them. In his letters from Tibhirine, he emphasized that monastic work is a way of sharing a common condition of life rather than exercising charity from a position of security. As he wrote, their calling was not to save others, but to live alongside them, sharing their constraints and uncertainties.

Because monks work and do not wish to be a burden on others, they do not take anything away from the poor. They do not work in order to give, but in order not to take. In this sense, their labor is an expression of respect and solidarity. The alms we give, therefore, should not come from money we have not earned ourselves, nor from resources produced by others while we ourselves contribute little or nothing. True sharing begins with a shared condition, and work is one of its most tangible forms.

### **Care for the poor and our hospitality**

The second element that Pope Leo XIV draws from the monastic tradition and care for the poor, and for which he puts forward St. Benedict, is the creation of a new culture through hospitality, through

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<sup>21</sup> I have gratefully made use of the interesting master’s thesis by Father Simone Santo Previte CRS: *L’économie et le travail dans l’enseignement du bienheureux frère Christian de Chergé*, University of Fribourg, 2022.

sharing, through caring, and through listening. On this point, too, the brothers of Tibhirine have something to say to us. For them, poverty is the structural condition for monastic hospitality. Christian de Chergé makes it clear that poverty is not an incidental ascetic value, but a structural condition for the way in which hospitality becomes possible. The community of Tibhirine consciously chooses a sober, almost self-sufficient way of life, which is not focused on economic growth but on "a modest material balance without outside labor".<sup>22</sup>

This poverty is not defensive, but open: it enables monastic life to be lived not above, but among the local population. In this context of Tibhirine, the guesthouse could not be a luxury facility, but became a simple place of encounter, embedded in daily work and shared vulnerability. Poverty thus prevents hospitality from being based on power or abundance and preserves it as a relational practice.

In the above-mentioned letter from 1972, Christian de Chergé writes that the community accepts that hospitality is "a true employment based on the mission that the Church entrusts to us 'here and now', of presence and waiting... to be able to live monastic hospitality with our neighbors, our guests, to the threshold of sharing".<sup>23</sup> Here, hospitality is not an additional activity alongside monastic life, but a concrete form in which poverty is transformed into presence and availability. Precisely because the community lives on simple work and limited resources, it can be hospitable without functioning as a service provider or religious institution with social power. Hospitality thus becomes a shared living space, not a performance.

Central to Tibhirine is that poverty and hospitality come together in a shared life, especially with the poor. In his letter of December 1993, Blessed Christian expresses this explicitly: "Our state as MONKS (ruhbân) binds us to God's choice for us, which is prayer and simple life, manual work, acceptance and sharing with all, especially the poorest".<sup>24</sup> Here it becomes clear that hospitality is not separate from poverty but arises from it. Poverty is the condition of life in which hospitality becomes credible; hospitality is the way in which poverty opens itself to the other. Together, they form the core of their presence in Algeria: not missionary expansion, but a humble, vulnerable, and welcoming way of living together, in which encounter becomes possible without appropriation. With its hospitality, the community of Tibhirine was an example of what Pope Leo meant by his words about a hospitality that *overcomes the culture of exclusion, creating an economy of solidarity in contrast to the logic of accumulation*.<sup>25</sup>

When you see poverty not only as a financial deficiency, the economy of solidarity takes on a totally different, richer meaning, and we can also apply it very well to our living together as brothers and sisters in the community and in the Order. Caring for the poor is also and above all caring for the poor in our own community. Myself first and foremost, but also those brothers and sisters whom St. Benedict calls the difficult, the stubborn, the disobedient, the weak brother or sister, in short, the other with all his or her moral and psychical limitations. But also the sick, the elderly, and even the younger brothers and sisters. We can all be that poor brother or sister. Do we create a climate of hospitality in our communities by sharing our lives with them, by caring for them, and by listening

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<sup>22</sup> C. de Chergé, lettre à frère Vincent Desprez (09.01.1972), *Moines de Tibhirine, Heureux ceux qui espèrent*. Autobiographies spirituelles, p. 336.

<sup>23</sup> *idem*. « un 'vrai service' fondé sur la mission que l'Église nous confie 'hic et nunc', de présence et d'attente... Pouvoir vivre l'accueil monastique avec nos voisins, nos invités, jusqu'au seuil du partage »

<sup>24</sup> C. de Chergé, lettre à Sayat Attya (28.12.1993) lue au chapitre le 04.01.1994, *Moines de Tibhirine, Heureux ceux qui espèrent*, Autobiographies spirituelles, p. 463. « Notre état de MOINES (rubân) nous lie au choix de Dieu sur nous, qui est la prière et la vie simple, le travail manuel, l'acceptation et le partage avec tous, surtout avec les plus pauvres. »

<sup>25</sup> cf. *Dilexit te*, 56.

to them? Or do we exclude them, marginalize them or ignore them. Related to this, Pope Leo recalls the challenging commentary from Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti* on the parable of the Good Samaritan:

Which of these persons do you identify with? This question, blunt as it is, is direct and incisive. Which of these characters do you resemble? We need to acknowledge that we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak. Let us admit that, for all the progress we have made, we are still 'illiterate' when it comes to accompanying, caring for and supporting the most frail and vulnerable members of our developed societies. We have become accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, and ignoring situations until they affect us directly.<sup>26</sup>

Caring for the poor means caring for a culture of hospitality that overcomes a culture of exclusion, even inside our own communities. Yet Pope Leo's words are not only relevant to how we welcome people from outside or within our community. We must not shy away from the real questions surrounding this economy of solidarity and breaking with the logic of accumulating possessions and profits. Many of our monasteries have considerable possessions. How does this relate to the tension between an economy of solidarity and breaking the logic of accumulation? Is everything we have really necessary?

It is sometimes painful to see, but some of our communities have nothing or very little, while others have so much that they often do not even know how much they have. What do we do with the call from the *Carta Caritatis*:

But should any church fall into intolerable poverty, let the abbot of that monastery take care to make this matter known before the whole chapter. Then let the abbots, one and all, enkindled by the most intense fire of charity, hasten to relieve the penury of that church, according to their resources, from the goods bestowed on them by God.<sup>27</sup>

Why is the theme of the Commission for Solidarity and the mandatory or non-mandatory contribution of the communities a point on which we cannot seem to have a meaningful conversation at the General Chapter? And again, this is not just about financial need. What do we do with our shared responsibility towards the care of new foundations (C. 69; ST 69.1.B; ST. 69.1.C)? What do we do to help each other in the area of formation? ST. 45.3.B says: *Monasteries are to offer generous mutual assistance in making this formation a reality*. There is so much 'intolerable poverty' among us. Are we ready to relieve this *enkindled by the most intense fire of charity*?

At the level of our community life, too, we must not shy away from the challenges in this area. Does our community life bear witness to solidarity, or is it rather an atmosphere of everybody for themselves, of self-centeredness? This is often very concrete in our form of community life: do I take everything I can get, or do I see if there is enough for everyone? How do I deal with money? Is it my private money or is it the money of the community? We all know very well that our vows exclude private property, and yet many, openly or secretly, constantly fall into that trap. Again, it is about giving or taking. Caring for the poor through hospitality is also very concrete and close at hand in the life of the community.

These are symptoms of an unhealthy society. A society that seeks prosperity but turns its back on suffering. May we not sink to such depths! Let us look to the example of the

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<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 64; Pope Leo, *Dilexit te*, 105.

<sup>27</sup> *Carta Caritatis*, 7.4.

Good Samaritan.” The final words of the Gospel parable — “Go and do likewise” ( Lk 10:37) — represent a mandate that every Christian must daily take to heart.<sup>28</sup>

### **Care for the poor and humility**

In the *Exordium Magnum*, one of the early documents of the Order, the Founders of Citeaux are described as “the poor men of Christ” (EM 13); “these poor ones of Christ” (EM 18); “the poor of Christ” (EM 18). St. Stephen is described as “the poor man of Christ” (EM 24). Their poverty is linked to the poverty of Christ (EM 20; 25). Citeaux opened its doors not only to the nobility but also to the poor (EM 21): “the nobility, the poor and those in between filled the stable of Christ and were wrapped in the swaddling clothes of his innocence”. (EM 21). Citeaux itself is described as “poor and small” (EM 21).

Pope Leo says:

Where monks and nuns have opened their doors to the poor, the Church has revealed with humility and firmness that contemplation does not exclude mercy but demands it as its purest fruit.<sup>29</sup>

Contemplation requires poverty, that is to say, the spiritual attitude of a desire for total dependence on God. Thomas Merton wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

Contemplation is carried away by Him into His own realm, His own mystery and His own freedom. It is a pure and a virginal knowledge, poor in concepts, poorer still in reasoning, but able, by its very poverty and purity, to follow the Word “wherever He may go.”<sup>30</sup>

When our Founders and the first Cîteaux are described as poor, this is more than a physical reality. It is also a reference to an experience of total dependence on God. This is equivalent to the attitude of humility that characterizes the paradoxical way in which Christ, according to Christian tradition, reveals his divinity. St. Augustine says: “Let those who become proud be ashamed, for God made himself humble in Jesus”.<sup>31</sup>

A spiritual view of poverty is not an excuse for poverty, but a conscious dependence on and focus on God’s gracious goodness, which poverty should result in for those who voluntarily take it upon themselves. Poverty becomes the sign of unity with God in following Christ. His identity is to be nothing other than openness to and dependence on God’s presence, which He paradoxically embodies fully by not clinging to it as a possession, but by emptying himself of it and thus receiving it back (Phil. 2:6-9).<sup>32</sup>

Poverty and deprivation are not good in themselves. If they were, they would function as a kind of possession. The point is that poverty refers to dependence on God who gives life, and it is this dependence on God that demands acceptance in poverty. The Dutch theologian and lay Dominican Erik Borgman says:

Sharing in poverty with faith means seeing it as the space where the abundance of good life, with a view to which people were created by God, is given and present in the desire for it and in the life that carries this desire. Not holding on to what you have, but considering it a ‘loss’ (cf. Phil 3:7-8) in the light of what is to come, consciously and

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<sup>28</sup> *Fratelli tutti*, 66; *Dilexit te*, 107.

<sup>29</sup> *Dilexit te*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New York: New Directions, 1961, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, Sermon CXXIII, n.1. Quoted in E. Borgman, *Alle dingen nieuw*, p. 108.

<sup>32</sup> cf. Borgman, 110.

confidently dependent on what will then be graciously given. Faith must therefore, as Jesus Christ demonstrated, descend into what is marginal and poor, independent and not complacent. For from what has been broken open by dependence and hope, God's future is born.<sup>33</sup>

Borgman even extends this experience of poverty to prayer, specifically the prayer of Jesus on the cross: *God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

According to the Gospel, this cry of ultimate deprivation and loss conceals the definitive breakthrough of God's future for all and everything. God shares the poverty of godforsakenness with us and, in this way, transforms it into a precarious form of closeness.<sup>34</sup>

This view of spiritual poverty and humility is also found in the writings of Blessed Christian de Chergé. Poverty is not primarily economic but above all relational and spiritual. We have already seen that, poverty means: a shared condition of life with the poor (the workers), a conscious distance from power, efficiency thinking, and possessions, a form of incarnation in a concrete social reality. This becomes explicit when he speaks of monastic work that is only meaningful if it is lived "*en solidarité avec les PAUVRES*" and with "*la foule des travailleurs*".<sup>35</sup> Poverty is therefore not an ascetic goal in itself, but a way of living not above, but among others.

This chosen poverty presupposes and nourishes humility. Humility as a basic attitude of listening, receiving, and being dependent:

- humility before God (not determining the meaning or fruit of the work oneself),
- humility in the face of reality (acceptance of slowness, limitation, non-profitability),
- humility towards others, especially Muslims and the poor.

Christian de Chergé explicitly opposes the modern logic of efficiency and immediate results. He speaks of "a form of efficiency that is not very accessible in our time with its immediate returns".<sup>36</sup> From a theological point of view, this is a humble attitude: the work bears fruit, but not necessarily in a visible, measurable, or appropriable way.

For Christian de Chergé, poverty is the concrete form of life in which humility takes shape, and humility is the inner attitude that makes poverty livable and fruitful. Poverty without humility would become ideological or heroic; humility without poverty would become abstract or internal. In Tibhirine, both are embodied in work, austerity, slowness, and shared existence.

Our brothers of Tibhirine bear witness to the fact that poverty is not deprivation, but freedom from possessions and power. They also bear witness to a humility that is not self-abasement, but a love

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<sup>33</sup> *idem*, 111-112.

<sup>34</sup> *idem*, 112.

<sup>35</sup> C. de Chergé, chapitre du 21.01.1993, *Dieu pour tout jour. Chapitres de Père Christian de Chergé à la communauté de Tibhirine (1986-1996)*, p. 424. 'C'est alors que le travail monastique peut prétendre servir une unité sans frontières, et s'exercer en solidarité avec les PAUVRES [...] et avec « la FOULE des TRAVAILLEURS » qui ont droit, eux aussi, à découvrir leur dignité et leur liberté dans ce monde du travail si fortement marqué par les discriminations et l'oppression.'

<sup>36</sup> C. de Chergé, lettre en réponse à son père (01.05.1969), *Moines de Tibhirine, Heureux ceux qui espèrent. Autobiographies spirituelles*, p. 319. 'Il y a au sein d'une vocation tournée vers la prière, un type d'efficacité peu accessible à notre époque de rendement immédiat : il s'agit de se mettre à l'échelle de l'éternel pour comprendre la logique de certains appels du Seigneur.'

of truth about one's own place, as a human being and as a community. This brings us to a positive, evangelical view of poverty.

### **III. An evangelical view of poverty**

In the apostolic exhortation *Dilexi te* Pope Leo XIV emphasizes that poverty should not be understood exclusively as a social or economic problem, but also as the revelation of the radical dignity of human beings, as a place of encounter with God, and as a call to love and solidarity. It is precisely this evangelical interpretation of the concept of poverty that helps us to better understand our vow of *conversatio morum*, which includes poverty, so that our commitment to the poor also can be accompanied by a change in mentality that can have an impact at the cultural level.<sup>37</sup>

#### **Poverty reveals the radical dignity of human beings**

God loves you not for what you possess or achieve, but for who you are. Poverty therefore exposes the lie that human value depends on success or possessions; the poor are not seen as 'deficient', but as fully human, sustained by God's love. In this sense, poverty has a prophetic power; it reminds the Church and the society of what really matters.

"If I encounter a person sleeping outdoors on a cold night, I can view him or her as an annoyance, an idler, an obstacle in my path, a troubling sight, a problem for politicians to sort out, or even a piece of refuse cluttering a public space. Or I can respond with faith and charity and see in this person a human being with a dignity identical to my own, a creature infinitely loved by the Father, an image of God, a brother or sister redeemed by Jesus Christ. That is what it is to be a Christian! Can holiness somehow be understood apart from this lively recognition of the dignity of each human being?"<sup>38</sup>

#### **Poverty as a place of encounter with God**

Material poverty can (not automatically, but often) lead to inner openness, dependence, and trust; those who have little can experience more keenly that life is a gift. This is in line with the evangelical idea of the poor in spirit, people who do not place their security in possessions, but in their relationship with God and with others.

Pope Leo says in *Dilexit te*:

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.<sup>39</sup>

#### **Poverty as a call to love and solidarity**

It makes God's love visible through others (mercy, justice, charity); the poor are not only recipients, but also bearers of God's presence (what you have done for the least). In *Dilexit te* poverty is not only seen as an object of pity, but as a calling in which love and solidarity take concrete form and in which Christian love is connected with the struggle for justice and human dignity.

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<sup>37</sup> cf. *Dilexit te*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 98; Pope Leo *Dilexit te*, 106.

<sup>39</sup> *Dilexit te*, 5.

The following three quotes from *Dilexit te* clearly illustrate this:

Love for the Lord, then, is one with love for the poor. The same Jesus who tells us ... "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). ... In the poor, he continues to speak to us.<sup>40</sup>

God has a special place in his heart for [the poor] ... and he asks us, his Church, to make a decisive and radical choice in favor of the weakest.<sup>41</sup>

The condition of the poor ... constantly challenges our lives, societies ... and the Church ... If we remain unresponsive to that cry, the poor might well cry out to the Lord against us.<sup>42</sup>

### Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, I began this circular letter in Nigeria, and I am ending it in Indonesia. In both countries, I had the privilege of visiting the two youngest foundations of the Order. Both the brothers of Akokwa and those of Penggadoban live in very poor conditions, but in both communities, I was able to experience the joy of poverty because the brothers live with the awareness that God loves each one of them. Life in these new foundations brings you back to the essence of the vocation: total dependence on God. They are a testimony to the radical dignity of every human being in societies dominated by violence and corruption (Nigeria) and amidst of the destruction of the tropical rainforest for economic gain (Indonesia). They bear witness to the monastery as a place of encounter with God. Akokwa bears the beautiful name of Porta Coeli, door of heaven, and Penggadoban means in the local language something like struggle, referring to the struggle of the patriarch Jacob with the angel by the river Jabbok (Gen. 32).

Both new foundations not only show how seriously the brothers take the call to love the poor and to live in solidarity with the people around them. They also call for love and solidarity from all our communities to meet their needs. But above all, they show that caring for the poor as a call to love and solidarity is their constant prayer. In *Dilexit te* Pope Leo underlines this by giving the example of St. Clare:

Her prayerful and hidden life was a cry against worldliness and a silent defense of the poor and forgotten.<sup>43</sup>

At the end of this circular letter I want to quote Isaac of Stella:

Courage, then, brothers and sisters; it is for us who are poor to listen to the Poor Man commanding poverty to the poor. Someone speaking from experience is to be believed; Christ was born poor, lived poor, and died poor. He willed to die; certainly, he did not will to become rich. Let us believe Truth when he tells us of the way to life. If it is hard, it is brief, while happiness is eternal. It is narrow but it leads to life and brings us out into freedom; it will set our feet in an open place. It is steep, of course it is, for it goes uphill, it reaches to heaven! So, we must be lightly equipped, not heavily encumbered, for the climb.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *idem*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> *idem*, 16.

<sup>42</sup> *idem*, 9; 8.

<sup>43</sup> *idem*, 65.

<sup>44</sup> Isaac of Stella, Sermon 1.19.

Brothers and sisters, I hope that you will all take up Pope Leo's apostolic exhortation, reflect on it, and translate it into concrete actions of care for the poor within and around your community, but also between the communities and regions within the Order. May the poor, and also your own experience of poverty, bring you closer to Jesus, the '*Poor Man*', who was rich but became poor for your sake. May Our Lady of Cîteaux give us the burning love to care for one another because, *Deus dilexit te*, God loves each of us personally!

Br. Bernardus Peeters ocsO  
Abbot General

Abbey of Rawaseneng, 20 January 2026  
Memory of Blessed Cyprian Michael Tansi