

Poverty, Saint Bernadette and Catholic theology



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Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Poverty and Bernadette Soubirous	4
2.1 Poverty and illness	4
2.2 Social marginalisation.....	4
2.3 Bernadette's own disposition towards poverty.....	5
3. Scriptural and Patristic foundations	6
3.1 The ambiguity of scripture.....	6
3.2 The Church Fathers: Wealth as danger, poverty as duty	6
4. The Medieval Synthesis: Scholasticism and the mendicant ideal	7
4.1 Aquinas and the ethics of property	7
4.2 Francis, Dominic and the meaning of mendicancy	8
5. Disruption and reconsolidation: The Early Modern period	8
5.1 Reformation challenges	8
5.2 Industrialisation and the 'Social Question'	9
6. Rerum Novarum and the birth of Catholic Social Teaching	9
6.1 The Encyclical and Its context	9
6.2 The <i>Centesimus Annus</i> Tradition.....	10
7. Liberation Theology: The Preferential Option for the Poor	11
7.1 Origins and Key Figures.....	11
7.2 The Vatican's Response: Ambivalence and Eventual Accommodation.....	11
8. Pope Francis: Poverty at the heart of the Pontificate	12
8.1 A Church for the poor	12
8.2 Poverty as a theological category	13
9. Pope Leo XIV and <i>Dilexi Te</i> (2025): Consolidation and Urgency	14
9.1 The first Apostolic Exhortation	14
9.2 Voluntary Poverty and Structural Poverty in <i>Dilexi Te</i>	14
9.3 Continuity and Distinctiveness	15
10. Theological assessment: the enduring tension	15
10.1 Poverty as Virtue: Spirituality and Kenosis	15
10.2 Poverty as sin: Structural analysis and the Common Good	16
10.3 The Continuing Tension and Its Productive Character.....	17
11. Conclusion	17
References	18

1. Introduction

Saint Bernadette Soubirous (1844–1879) occupies a remarkable place in the history of Catholic devotion, not only because of the apparitions she described at Lourdes in 1858, but also because of the extraordinary material destitution in which she lived for much of her life. Far from the romanticised portrayals that have sometimes attended her popular veneration, a historically grounded examination reveals a young woman whose family existed at the very margins of mid-nineteenth-century French provincial society. We begin by asking how did deprivation shape both Bernadette's character and how her accounts were received by the Church. We then broaden the focus to examine how poverty has been understood in Catholic theology, including tackling the theological challenges raised in this. If the God of Israel hears the cry of the poor (Exodus 22:23) and the Christ of the Gospels proclaims the poor blessed (Luke 6:20), what exactly does it mean that the Church, his Body, has at various periods in its history grown magnificently wealthy whilst the majority of those it served remained desperately indigent? And what does it mean, conversely, that voluntary poverty has consistently been regarded within the same tradition as one of the highest paths to holiness?

The answer is not that the Church has been hypocritical, though hypocrisy has undoubtedly manifested itself from time to time. The answer is that the tradition has sustained, with varying degrees of comfort, two distinct but related theological claims: that poverty embraced freely, in imitation of the kenosis of Christ (Philippians 2:7), is spiritually transformative; and that poverty imposed upon persons against their will by unjust economic arrangements is a structural sin that offends the dignity of the human person, itself made in the image of God. The relationship between these two claims — their mutual reinforcement, their periodic collision, and the institutional forms they have generated — constitutes the central thread of this paper.

We begin by positioning Bernadette Soubirous within the poverty of her time. We then look at poverty within Catholic Church history and teachings. The patristic period established the foundational terms. The medieval Church institutionalised voluntary poverty in the religious life, whilst the Scholastic philosophy provided the framework for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate wealth. The early modern period brought both the dissolution of the mendicant ideal's cultural dominance and the emergence of new forms of poverty generated by capitalism. The encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII, 1891) inaugurated modern Catholic social teaching. The Latin American Church, confronted with widespread structural poverty in the twentieth century, developed liberation theology and the 'preferential option for the poor'. Recent pontificates, above all those of Francis and Leo XIV, have integrated these movements into the mainstream of Catholic magisterial teaching

with a directness that would have surprised — and perhaps disturbed — some earlier interpreters of the tradition.

2. Poverty and Bernadette Soubirous

Bernadette was the eldest surviving child of François Soubirous and Louise Castérot. Her father was a miller by trade; however, the family's economic situation deteriorated significantly during the 1840s and 1850s, a period marked by considerable financial instability throughout rural France (Trochu, 1958). The closure of the mill in Boly, where Bernadette was born, compelled the family to reside in a series of increasingly inadequate dwellings.

The nadir of the family's material circumstances was reached when they were compelled to reside in the '*cachot*'—a term literally meaning 'the dungeon'—which was a solitary, damp chamber previously used as the local jail and subsequently condemned as unfit for human habitation (Laurentin, 1979). It was within these conditions of severe squalor that Bernadette resided during the time of the apparitions in 1858. The *cachot* was deficient in proper ventilation, susceptible to flooding, and offered its occupants no privacy, inadequate cooking facilities, or means for maintaining basic hygiene. The Soubirous family—comprising six members—survived there mainly through the charity of neighbours and the sporadic labour of François, who encountered difficulty securing consistent employment.

2.1 Poverty and illness

The connection between Bernadette's poverty and her physical frailty is well documented. She suffered from severe asthma from childhood, a condition significantly exacerbated by the damp and overcrowded conditions in which she lived (Neame, 1967). Malnutrition was a further complicating factor: the family's diet was meagre and inconsistent, and Bernadette's stunted growth — she never grew taller than approximately 1.4 metres — has been attributed in part to childhood deprivation (Harris, 1999).

It is significant that Bernadette was sent to stay with her wet nurse, Marie Laguës, at Bartrès for extended periods during her childhood, partly because the family could not adequately provide for her and partly because her health required the cleaner air of the countryside. These arrangements, whilst beneficial in some respects, also meant that Bernadette received little formal schooling and remained largely illiterate in French well into her adolescence — a circumstance that later complicated the Church's investigations into her account of the apparitions (Laurentin, 1979).

2.2 Social marginalisation

The impoverishment of the Soubirous family extended beyond material deprivation to encompass profound social marginalization. In the highly stratified society of a small French provincial town, the family's visible poverty relegated them to the fringes of respectability. François Soubirous was briefly detained on suspicion of theft in 1857 — a charge that was ultimately dismissed but nonetheless served to bolster the family's reputation as subjects of social suspicion (Trochu, 1958). Bernadette was perceived by many of her contemporaries as simple and lacking in refinement; her limited proficiency in French, her Gascon dialect, and her absence of formal education distinguished her as markedly inferior in the eyes of educated bourgeois observers.

This marginalisation had theological and ecclesiological significance. When Bernadette reported the apparitions to the local curé, Abbé Peyramale, she was received initially with scepticism, and some of the difficulty she encountered was plainly connected to her social status (Harris, 1999). The Church's eventual acceptance of her testimony was, in part, a recognition that the message of Lourdes was addressed to those whom society had overlooked — a reading consistent with the Magnificat's celebration of God's preferential care for the lowly.

2.3 Bernadette's own disposition towards poverty

It would be a distortion to suggest that Bernadette simply endured poverty passively. The historical record, including testimony gathered during the beatification and canonisation processes, indicates that she developed a notably unsentimental, even serene, relationship with her own destitution (Petitot, 1952). She is recorded as having rebuffed attempts to exploit her association with Lourdes commercially, and she consistently refused gifts or special treatment. When she entered the Sisters of Charity of Nevers in 1866, she did so as a postulant without dowry — itself a mark of the family's continued poverty — and was accepted by the congregation partly because of the renown her name had brought to Lourdes.

Within religious life, Bernadette embraced a form of evangelical poverty that was consistent with her Franciscan-influenced formation. She expressed discomfort with unnecessary material comfort and, in her letters and the testimony of her sisters in community, articulated a theology of suffering and abandonment that drew directly upon her experience of material deprivation (Petitot, 1952). Her famous declaration that she was 'good for nothing' in the eyes of the world was not false modesty but a precise theological statement: she understood herself as an instrument chosen precisely because she had no worldly resources to offer.

The impoverishment of Bernadette Soubirous prompts reflection on the broader theological category of the *anawim* — the Hebrew term for the poor and humble followers of God who

anticipate divine salvation (Brueggemann, 1986). Within the Catholic theological tradition, the preferential option for the poor, most systematically articulated in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent magisterial teachings, finds in Bernadette a compelling nineteenth-century example (Vatican Council II, 1965). She was not impoverished in an abstract or purely spiritual sense, but in the most tangible and embodied manner: hungry, inadequately housed, uneducated, and stigmatized. Maritain's (1962) philosophical anthropology, with its insistence upon the irreducible dignity of the human person regardless of social position, offers a further lens through which to appreciate the significance of Bernadette's vocation. That the Mother of God should choose to appear to a girl from the *cachot* rather than to a person of wealth or ecclesiastical standing is, within this framework, not merely a devotional curiosity but a statement of profound anthropological and theological import: the person in herself, not her social position, is the bearer of eternal value.

3. Scriptural and Patristic foundations

3.1 The ambiguity of scripture

The Scriptures do not present a singular, cohesive theology of poverty; rather, their complexity has been simplified at times, leading to distortions across various periods of Christian history. The Hebrew Bible encompasses passages that depict wealth as a divine blessing (Deuteronomy 28:1–14), others that interpret poverty as a consequence of injustice (Amos 5:11–12; Isaiah 10:1–3), and additional strands—particularly in the Psalms and the '*anawim*' tradition—that portray the poor as the preferred recipients of divine favour precisely because they lack worldly resources (Psalm 34:6; Psalm 72:4).

The New Testament intensifies rather than resolves this complexity. The Magnificat's radical inversion of the social order (Luke 1:52–53), the Beatitudes in their Lucan form ('Blessed are the poor', Luke 6:20), the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), and the judgment scene of Matthew 25:31–46 all suggest that material poverty is a site of divine encounter that the comfortable ignore at their peril. Yet Matthew's version of the Beatitudes speaks of the 'poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3), a formulation that has sustained centuries of spiritualising interpretation. The Pauline collection for the Jerusalem church (2 Corinthians 8–9) grounds Christian giving in the self-impoverishment of Christ himself, who 'though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor' (2 Corinthians 8:9) — a passage that would resonate down through the tradition of voluntary religious poverty.

3.2 The Church Fathers: Wealth as danger, poverty as duty

The patristic writers, many of whom addressed congregations of diverse social backgrounds within the urbanized empire, regarded the scriptural testimony with utmost seriousness and articulated some of the most resolute social doctrines in Christian history—doctrines that remained predominantly dormant within the mainstream tradition until they were revitalized by liberation theologians in the twentieth century.

Basil of Caesarea (330–379) contended in his Homily on 'I will pull down my barns' that hoarded wealth inherently constitutes theft from the impoverished: 'The bread in your storehouse belongs to the hungry; the cloak in your wardrobe belongs to the naked; the shoes you let rot belong to the barefoot; the money in your vaults belongs to the destitute' (Basil, Hom. 6, cited in Holman, 2001: 67). This is not an exhortation toward heroic generosity but a reaffirmation of justice: the affluent do not give from their own resources but rather return what rightfully belongs to others. John Chrysostom (347–407) expanded upon this notion, asserting that the disparity in property resulted from sin rather than being a natural or divinely sanctioned order, and that redistributing surplus resources to the poor was a fundamental obligation of Christian ethics, not merely a commendable act.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430), characteristically, introduced greater complexity. His theology of the two cities discouraged the identification of any earthly economic arrangement with the Kingdom of God, yet he too insisted on the duty of almsgiving and the spiritual danger of attachment to wealth (Augustine, Serm. 14.4, cited in Brown, 2012). The emergence of Christian monasticism in the third and fourth centuries created an institutional form for the ideal of voluntary poverty: the monk or hermit who renounced property in imitation of the apostolic community (Acts 2:44–45) and thus embodied an alternative economy within the larger Church. Leo XIV would later trace this monastic impulse as the prototype of the Church's preferential option for the poor (Leo XIV, 2025a, para. 37).

4. The Medieval Synthesis: Scholasticism and the mendicant ideal

4.1 Aquinas and the ethics of property

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) laid the foundational philosophical framework within which Catholic discourse on poverty and property predominantly operated until the twentieth century. Drawing upon Aristotle's defence of private property and synthesising it with Augustinian theology and Roman law, Aquinas differentiated between the right to possess private property and the obligation to utilise it for the common good. Property rights were regarded not as absolute natural rights but as practical arrangements justified by their utility in maintaining social order; they did not negate the natural common destination of material goods for universal use (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q.66, a.2). In cases of extreme necessity — such as facing starvation — the exigencies of the situation superseded ordinary property rights, and taking what was needed was no longer considered theft.

This Thomistic framework was more nuanced than many later interpretations suggested. It did not categorize poverty as inherently just nor wealth as inherently sinful; rather, it evaluated property arrangements according to a fundamental criterion of the common good, which could give rise to significant obligations. Furthermore, it offered a theological foundation for the distinction—so vital in the mendicant disputes—between use and ownership: one could utilize material possessions without necessarily being attached to them or holding legal possession.

4.2 Francis, Dominic and the meaning of mendicancy

The thirteenth century marked a period of the most sustained and innovative Catholic engagement with voluntary poverty in history. Francis of Assisi (1181/2–1226) and his early followers did not merely practice asceticism; they transformed poverty into a theological declaration, an argument concerning the nature of the Church and the form that faithful discipleship should assume in a society increasingly organised around commerce and the accumulation of wealth. The Franciscan renunciation of all property, both individual and corporate, served as a kenotic imitation of Christ and as a prophetic critique of a Church that had become prosperous, worldly, and, in the view of many reformers, unfaithful (Moorman, 1968). Similarly, Dominic de Guzmán (1170–1221) pursued a comparable agenda through mendicant preaching, and the Dominican order likewise regarded corporate poverty as a fundamental element of its charism.

The mendicant ideal proved to be profoundly constructive across spiritual, intellectual, and cultural dimensions, while simultaneously generating considerable controversy. The Franciscan poverty controversy of the early fourteenth century, during which Pope John XXII condemned the Franciscan assertion that Christ and the Apostles possessed no property whatsoever, revealed the extent to which the poverty ideal constituted a direct challenge not merely to affluent individuals but also to the institutional Church itself (Lambert, 1998). This controversy was more effectively managed than resolved; voluntary religious poverty persisted as a recognised pathway to Christian perfection, institutionalised through religious vows and exempted from the conventional critique of property renunciation as socially irresponsible. However, in the prevailing medieval tradition, it did not serve as a basis for challenging the legitimacy of the feudal economic order, which maintained the labouring poor in a state of structural deprivation.

5. Disruption and reconsolidation: The Early Modern period

5.1 Reformation challenges

The Protestant Reformation markedly transformed the medieval economy, which was characterised by poverty, resulting in long-lasting implications for Catholic social doctrine. Martin Luther's critique of the theology of merit challenged a fundamental justification for almsgiving — the notion that charitable deeds contributed to the salvation of the donor — and his denunciation of monastic life as a form of works-righteousness abolished the institutional framework through which voluntary poverty was most prominently expressed (Luther, 1520/1883). Furthermore, Calvin's positive assessment of commercial enterprise and his rejection of the traditional Christian prohibition on usury provided a theological justification of capitalism, which Max Weber later recognised as essential to the development of the 'Protestant ethic' (Weber, 1904/2002).

The Catholic response was complex. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) reaffirmed the theology of merit, the vows of religious life, and the duty of charitable giving, but it did not produce a systematic account of economic ethics adequate to the emerging capitalist order. The great Spanish Scholastics of the sixteenth century — Vitoria, Molina, Suárez — developed sophisticated theories of just price and just wage that attempted to apply Thomistic principles to the new commercial realities, but their influence on pastoral practice was limited (Chafuen, 2003). The dominant tendency within post-Tridentine Catholicism was to maintain the traditional structures of charitable provision — the hospital, the orphanage, the confraternity — whilst largely accepting the prevailing social order as given.

5.2 Industrialisation and the 'Social Question'

The Industrial Revolution engendered forms of widespread poverty that were qualitatively distinct from those encountered by the medieval Church. The displacement of rural populations, the rise of the urban proletariat, the destruction of artisanal livelihoods through factory production, and the abolition of traditional social protections—all these developments generated a 'social question' that the prevailing structures of Catholic charity were clearly insufficient to address. The revolutionary movements of 1848 and the emergence of socialist politics demonstrated that the working class was capable of organising its own response to exploitation. Moreover, a Church limited to charitable relief risked losing both the loyalty of the impoverished and any prophetic voice within industrial society.

It was against this background that Pope Leo XIII (r. 1878–1903) issued the encyclical that inaugurated modern Catholic social teaching.

6. *Rerum Novarum* and the birth of Catholic Social Teaching

6.1 The Encyclical and Its context

Rerum Novarum ('Of New Things'), issued on 15 May 1891, addressed the condition of the working classes at a moment when both liberal capitalism and Marxist socialism were offering competing diagnoses of and solutions to the social question. Leo XIII navigated a middle course: rejecting socialist expropriation of private property while emphasising that the unrestricted exercise of property rights must be balanced by considerations of justice and the common good (Leo XIII, 1891).

The encyclical's debt to the Thomistic tradition is evident throughout. Property rights were defended as natural rights, but use was subordinated to social obligation. The just wage was articulated as a moral requirement, not merely a matter of contract: workers were entitled not to whatever the market would bear but to a wage sufficient to sustain themselves and their families in reasonable dignity. The state was accorded a positive role in regulating economic relations, a significant departure from the laissez-faire liberalism dominant in economic thought at the time. Trade unions were endorsed as legitimate instruments of workers' defence.

Simultaneously, *Rerum Novarum* retained features that would later attract criticism. Its unwavering support of private property was sufficiently definite to preclude more radical redistributive analyses. Its social perspective remained largely paternalistic, with the Church positioned as a mediator between capital and labour rather than as a proponent of the structural transformation of economic relations. Additionally, while it eloquently articulated the suffering of the poor, it did not develop the patristic concept of structural injustice: the poor were regarded as objects of charitable concern and subjects of rights, yet the systemic causes of their poverty were viewed as remediable through reform rather than demanding a more fundamental critique of the capitalist order (Dorr, 1992).

6.2 The *Centesimus Annus* Tradition

Rerum Novarum proved remarkably generative. Subsequent popes issued major social encyclicals to mark its anniversaries: Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), which introduced the principle of subsidiarity and made the first sustained Catholic critique of the concentration of economic power; John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963), which extended Catholic social concern to the international economic order and to human rights; Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967), which argued that 'development is the new name for peace' and challenged the structures of international economic inequality with unusual directness; and John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), and *Centesimus Annus* (1991), which continued and complicated the tradition (Curran, 2002).

Throughout this body of teachings, a notable development can be observed. The concept of 'structural sin'—sin embedded not only in individual moral decisions but also within economic and social structures that systematically undermine human dignity—gains increasing prominence. Pope Paul VI's notion of 'social sin' and Pope John Paul II's expansion

of this concept in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987: 36) signify a significant progression beyond the individual charity model predominant in *Rerum Novarum*, while still maintaining a rejection of Marxist class analysis. The tension between recognising structural injustice and avoiding what is perceived as Marxist reductionism would come to define a central challenge in the Church's engagement with liberation theology.

7. Liberation Theology: The Preferential Option for the Poor

7.1 Origins and Key Figures

Liberation theology originated in Latin America during the late 1960s as a response to a specific theological and societal context: a continent that was predominantly Catholic while also facing widespread structural poverty, political repression, and economic exploitation, with the institutional Church often implicated in these issues. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) urged the Church to interpret the 'signs of the times' (*Gaudium et Spes*: 4), and for Latin American theologians, the most pressing sign was the widespread poverty of the majority.

Gustavo Gutiérrez's "A Theology of Liberation" (1971/1988) served as the foundational declaration of the movement. Utilising social-scientific analysis, Biblical hermeneutics, and the tradition of the Church Fathers—particularly Basil and Chrysostom in regard to property and poverty—Gutiérrez contended that theology must be conducted 'from below', adopting the perspective of the impoverished. He emphasised that salvation history is intrinsically linked to the history of liberation for the oppressed. The phrase 'preferential option for the poor', which became the movement's rallying cry, did not imply an exclusive preference; rather, it signified that the God of Scripture shows a special concern for those deprived of the essentials for full human life. Furthermore, it underscores that the Church must reflect this priority in both its praxis and theological outlook (Gutiérrez, 1983).

Other significant figures included Leonardo Boff, whose ecclesiological work on base communities (*comunidades de base*) offered a model of Church organised around the poor rather than around clerical hierarchy; Jon Sobrino, whose Christology centred on the Jesus of the Gospels as one who identified with and was killed for his solidarity with the marginalised; and the bishops' conferences of Medellín (CELAM, 1968) and Puebla (CELAM, 1979), which offered institutional expression to the preferential option for the poor within the Latin American Church.

7.2 The Vatican's Response: Ambivalence and Eventual Accommodation

The Vatican's response to liberation theology was notably ambivalent. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in his capacity as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, promulgated two Instructions concerning aspects of liberation theology (CDF, 1984, 1986). The initial was predominantly critical, cautioning against the indiscriminate adoption of Marxist analysis, the diminution of salvation to merely political liberation, and the tendency to interpret the Gospel through the perspective of class struggle. The subsequent was more constructive, endorsing the legitimacy of the preferential option for the poor as a Gospel imperative and emphasising that genuine liberation is inextricably linked to liberation from sin (CDF, 1986).

The intricacy of this response reflected authentic theological disagreements within the tradition, not merely political calculations. The concern that liberation theology might subordinate the transcendent dimension of Christian faith to an immanent political programme was of significant theological gravity, even if the manner in which it was articulated occasionally obscured the equally profound theological assertion made by the liberationists: that a faith which isolates itself from structural injustice in the name of transcendence has, in practical terms, aligned itself with an unjust social order. John Paul II endorsed the preferential option for the poor in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), whilst continuing to oppose the more radical iterations of liberation theology; his appointments to Latin American episcopal sees consistently favoured candidates associated with more conservative positions.

By the time of Benedict XVI's pontificate, however, the broad framework of liberation theology had been substantially, if quietly, incorporated into Catholic social teaching. Benedict's *Deus Caritas Est* (2005) and *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) acknowledged the structural dimensions of poverty and the inadequacy of charity alone, whilst insisting on the ultimate grounding of social engagement in love rather than ideology. The preferential option for the poor was no longer contested terrain; the question was what it demanded in practice.

8. Pope Francis: Poverty at the heart of the Pontificate

8.1 A Church for the poor

Jorge Mario Bergoglio's election as Pope Francis in March 2013 marked a significant intensification of the Church's engagement with poverty, both symbolically and theologically. The choice of the name Francis signalled an identification with the mendicant tradition of voluntary poverty and solidarity with the poor; the new Pope's adoption of the title 'Bishop of Rome' rather than the more juridically loaded 'Vicar of Christ', his early

renunciation of the apostolic palace in favour of the Casa Santa Marta, and his repeated personal gestures of solidarity with those on the margins of society communicated a theological message before a word of formal teaching had been issued.

Francis's inaugural apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), established the foundational principles for his pontificate. Its economic critique was notably straightforward for a pontifical document, criticising 'trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in fostering greater justice and inclusivity worldwide' and recognising inequality as 'the root of social ills' (Francis, 2013: 54). The exhortation emphasised that 'the poor person, when loved, is esteemed as of great value' and advocated for 'a poor Church for the poor', a phrase that resonated with both the original Franciscan vision and the language of Medellín.

Laudato Si' (2015) extended the analysis of structural sin to encompass the ecological crisis, linking the exploitation of the poor and the exploitation of the natural environment as twin consequences of an extractive economic logic that reduces both persons and nature to instrumental value. *Laudato Deum* (2023) and *Laudate Deum* (2023) advanced the ecological argument further amid continued political inaction. His final encyclical, *Dilexit Nos* (2024), focused on the Sacred Heart of Jesus as the foundation of the Church's love for the poor and the suffering, providing the theological framework that Leo XIV would take up directly in *Dilexi Te*.

8.2 Poverty as a theological category

What distinguishes Francis's approach to poverty from much previous magisterial teaching is his consistent refusal to separate the theological and structural dimensions. The poor are not merely objects of charity; they are, in a phrase borrowed from Latin American tradition, 'teachers of the Gospel' (Francis, 2013: 198). The encounter with the poor signifies an encounter with Christ himself — a claim grounded not in romantic idealisation of deprivation but in the logic of the Incarnation and the Matthew 25 parable. Consequently, a Church that organises its efforts primarily around its own institutional maintenance, liturgical life, or the consolidation of doctrinal positions, while marginalising the poor or considering concern for them as optional, has, in a fundamental sense, lost its identity.

Francis also addressed the topics of 'social sin' and 'structures of sin' with increasing frequency, drawing upon the tradition of John Paul II while advancing the analysis of specific mechanisms—such as financial speculation, corporate tax evasion, and the lobbying influence of economic elites—that perpetuate poverty across successive generations (Francis, 2013; 2015). The implication was to conceptualise poverty not merely as an issue to be resolved through individual conversion and charitable endeavours, but as a systemic condition necessitating structural reform, in which the Church must assume an active and prophetic role.

9. Pope Leo XIV and *Dilexi Te* (2025): Consolidation and Urgency

9.1 The first Apostolic Exhortation

Robert Francis Prevost, elected as Pope Leo XIV in May 2025, brought to the papacy a formation shaped by his years as an Augustinian missionary in Peru — direct, personal experience of structural poverty of a kind that few of his predecessors had possessed. His first apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te* ('I Have Loved You'), signed on 4 October 2025 — the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi — and released on 9 October, represented both a continuation of Francis's legacy and a consolidation of the entire tradition traced in this paper.

The document is noteworthy for several characteristics. Firstly, its extensive historical scope: it chronicles the Church's involvement with poverty from the Acts of the Apostles through to deacon Stephen and Lawrence, encompassing the Church Fathers, mendicant orders, and women's religious congregations engaged in healthcare, education, and migration, up to contemporary times. In this regard, it presents a comprehensive vision of the preferential option for the poor (Leo XIV, 2025a).

Leo XIV extends his discourse beyond mere exhortation towards charitable deeds. He characterizes economic disparity as an intrinsic element of 'systemic sin' and 'systemic oppression.' Furthermore, he highlights the emergence of 'a wealthy elite, living in a bubble of comfort and luxury,' in conjunction with the escalating prevalence of mass poverty, as a profound moral scandal. He explicitly states that 'invisible market forces' will not rectify these inequalities absent structural intervention. The assertion that 'the poor are not there by chance or by blind and cruel fate' explicitly implicates human economic decisions and political structures in the genesis of poverty.

Finally, the document is marked by a sense of pastoral urgency. Leo XIV addresses directly those within the Church who would confine concern for the poor to 'charitable works' in a narrow sense whilst dismissing wider social engagement as political overreach. '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 reread the Gospel,' he wrote, 'lest we risk replacing it with the wisdom of the world' (Leo XIV, 2025a, cited in PBS NewsHour, 2025). A Church that fails in this dimension, he warns, 'will easily drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk'.

9.2 Voluntary Poverty and Structural Poverty in *Dilexi Te*

Leo XIV maintains the dual understanding of the tradition while refusing to permit the two poles to become comfortably separate. His approach to the mendicant orders and the tradition of voluntary poverty affirms its ongoing spiritual significance: poverty that is freely

chosen signifies the Kingdom, anticipates the eschatological reversal, and serves as a prophetic critique of the idolatry of wealth. However, this tradition does not exempt the wealthy from their obligations; rather, it challenges them to scrutinise their relationship to material possessions and to acknowledge that the poor are not mere sociological abstractions, but members of the singular family of God. Leo XIV emphasises that no Christian can regard the poor solely as a societal issue, for they are integral to the one family of God (Leo XIV, 2025a, cited in NPR, 2025).

The document also broadens the scope of poverty to encompass not only material deprivation but also deficits in rights, social recognition, and individual freedom—highlighting the plight of migrants and refugees. Leo explicitly links their poverty to structural economic inequality and regards their welcome as a measure of Christian authenticity. In this context, he positions the current migration crisis within the broader historical tradition of the Church's concern for displaced persons, referencing Francis's 'four verbs'—welcome, protect, promote, and integrate—as the practical application of the preferential option in the modern era (Leo XIV, 2025a: 75).

9.3 Continuity and Distinctiveness

Leo XIV's rapport with his predecessor is formally recognized and holds theological significance. *Dilexi Te* is partially constructed upon a draft authored by Francis, and Leo has characterized his approach as being 'happy to make this document my own' (Leo XIV, 2025a, cited in Deseret News, 2025). Cardinal Michael Czerny, one of the principal collaborators on the document, described it as '100 per cent Francis and 100 per cent Leo' (PBS NewsHour, 2025). The continuity is evident; however, Leo's own distinctive contribution is also apparent. While Francis's most immediate economic critiques appeared in the somewhat informal tone of *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Dilexi Te* articulates them in a more measured manner, emulating an apostolic exhortation that explicitly builds upon the entire historical corpus of Catholic social teaching—referred to by the document as 'a veritable treasury of significant teachings' (Leo XIV, 2025a, cited in Vatican News, 2025).

Leo's explicit connection of his name to Leo XIII — the Pope who inaugurated Catholic social teaching in 1891 — is not coincidental. *Dilexi Te* presents itself as a development of the tradition inaugurated by *Rerum Novarum*, carrying it forward from a predominantly defensive response to socialism towards a positive theological anthropology centred on the dignity of the poor as the site of divine revelation. The distance from *Rerum Novarum*'s relatively cautious structural analysis to *Dilexi Te*'s characterisation of economic inequality as systemic sin measures the distance the tradition has travelled in 134 years.

10. Theological assessment: the enduring tension

10.1 Poverty as Virtue: Spirituality and Kenosis

The theological argument supporting voluntary poverty as a pathway to Christian perfection is founded on principles that the tradition has consistently upheld and continues to find persuasive. Philippians 2 depicts the Incarnation as an act of self-impoverishment; the Christ who was endowed with riches became impoverished so that, through His poverty, believers might attain prosperity (2 Corinthians 8:9). The call to voluntary renunciation—'Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor' (Mark 10:21)—is not conveyed in the Gospels as a recommendation solely for the exceptionally heroic but as a requisite of discipleship for those whom Jesus cherished. Although the tradition of voluntary poverty in religious life has sometimes been formalised and domesticated, it still bears witness to an essential anthropological truth: that human identity is constituted not through possession but through giving; not through accumulation but through communion.

This dimension of the tradition is not a mere expression of pious idealism irrelevant to the structural analysis of poverty. It offers a theological foundation for the critique of consumerism and accumulation promoted by social encyclicals; it designates as idolatry what economic culture terms aspiration; and it preserves a vision of human flourishing that transcends mere material sufficiency. Leo XIII explicitly draws on this tradition in his exposition of the mendicant charism, and contemporary theologies of simplicity and solidarity (Volf, 1996; Cavanaugh, 2008) continue to develop it through ongoing dialogue with social analysis.

10.2 Poverty as sin: Structural analysis and the Common Good

The theological justification for considering imposed poverty as a form of structural sin is firmly rooted in both scripture and tradition. The patristic perspective that hoarded wealth is equivalent to theft from the impoverished, combined with the Thomistic assertion that the common destination of material goods supersedes the absolute right to private property, is complemented by the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible. Additionally, the preferential option for the poor, as articulated by liberation theology and integrated into mainstream magisterial teachings, coalesces around the principle that a social structure in which some individuals lack the material means necessary for a dignified human existence, while others amass wealth in an unbounded manner, is inherently morally unacceptable. Such a scenario constitutes an injustice that demands more than mere charitable actions; it necessitates transformative change.

The importance of this assertion should not be underestimated. To characterise poverty as a form of structural sin implies that the responsibility to eradicate it rests not solely with individuals engaging in voluntary charity but also with institutions, governments, and the Church itself. It asserts that poverty is not an inherent condition of a segment of humanity but rather a consequence of specific economic and political decisions—decisions that can, in principle, be altered. Furthermore, it situates the eradication of poverty within the context of Christian eschatology: not as a terrestrial utopia attainable solely through political

resolve, but as a symbol and prefiguration of the Kingdom that the Church is called to embody and proclaim.

10.3 The Continuing Tension and Its Productive Character

The tension between these two perspectives on poverty has neither been fully resolved nor necessarily ought to be within the tradition. Voluntary poverty, absent a structural analysis, risks becoming spiritually introspective, focusing predominantly on the sanctification of individuals who renounce wealth rather than on the liberation of those compelled by circumstances. Conversely, structural analysis alone, without acknowledging voluntary poverty, risks reducing the Gospel to a political agenda and neglecting the eschatological dimension that safeguards social engagement from devolving into mere humanitarianism.

The most significant moments in the tradition — including the Franciscan movement, the Latin American Churches of Medellín and Puebla, the pontificate of Francis, and the inaugural magisterial act of Leo XIII — are precisely those in which both aspects are maintained simultaneously: where voluntary simplicity and structural critique mutually reinforce each other, where the kenotic spirituality of individuals who choose poverty freely becomes a resource for advocating on behalf of those who suffer poverty involuntarily, and where the concept of the preferential option for the poor is understood as both a spiritual journey and a political strategy.

11. Conclusion

We began this chapter in the cachot in Lourdes, with the young, sickly and impoverished Bernadette Soubirous. We have seen how her poverty was both an obstacle to early recognition of her accounts and, later, provided a clear and reinforcing alignment with the Christian tradition where the Son of God is born in a stable, not a palace. We then traced a development in Catholic theological understanding of poverty that spans two millennia and shows no sign of reaching a terminus. The scriptural ambiguity between poverty as divine favour and poverty as injury; the patristic insistence on the social obligations of wealth; the medieval institutionalisation of voluntary poverty in religious life; the Scholastic framework of property and common good; the disruptions of Reformation and industrialisation; the inauguration of modern Catholic social teaching in *Rerum Novarum*; the emergence of liberation theology and the preferential option for the poor; the magisterial consolidations of Francis and Leo XIV — these constitute not a simple line of progress but a complex tradition in which earlier insights have been recovered, recontextualised, and sometimes suppressed before reasserting themselves.

What can be said with confidence is that the dominant trajectory of the last 130 years has been a decisive movement away from a model centred on individual charity and spiritual resignation towards a model centred on structural analysis, systemic transformation, and

the political implications of the preferential option for the poor. Pope Leo XIV's *Dilexi Te* represents the most comprehensive and historically grounded statement of this movement yet produced at the level of papal magisterium, situating the Church's commitment to the poor not as one concern among many but as 'the burning heart of the Church's mission'.

The ongoing tension between viewing poverty as a virtue and as a sin remains a fertile area of reflection. It resists the simplification of Christian social involvement into either personal holiness or political activism, maintaining a vision of the human person — created in God's image and redeemed by a God who embraced poverty — that neither liberal capitalism nor its critics can fully accommodate. The tradition's responsibility, in each generation, is to preserve these two aspects together with sufficient creativity and courage, thereby speaking truthfully to the particular injustices it encounters. Based on the evidence presented in *Dilexi Te*, this task continues to be relevant within the contemporary Church.

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