



DICASTERIUM
PRO LAICIS, FAMILIA ET VITA

One in Christ in His heart for the poor

Clergy-Lay Congress 45th Anniversary - Couples for Christ

Ispirational Message

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Dears Bishops, Priests, Religious and Lay Friends,

It is a great joy to be here on the behalf of the Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life. I bring to you the greetings of our Cardinal Kevin Farrell and the ones of all the Dicastery.

The title you have chosen for this congress is so vital: *One in Christ, in his heart, for the poor!*

I know that this choice comes out from a common discernment.

The theme combines fundamental points of Pope Leo's pontificate. We are all very grateful to Pope Leo for his pontificate and we are very close to him! So I want to reflect on these points during this congress. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexit Te*, Pope Leo XIV makes us understand that it is fundamental for Couples for Christ (CFC) to take care of the poor. In fact, he says in the Exhortation that: "any Church community, if it thinks it can comfortably go its own way without creative concern and effective cooperation in helping the poor to live with dignity and reaching out to everyone, will also risk breaking down."¹

One in Christ

¹ Pope Leo XIV, Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexit Te*, n. 113.

At the beginning of this Congress we can reflect on the title starting from the fact that the whole CFC movement finds its unity and its strength from being united in the name of Jesus. Even Pope Leo in his motto has unity in him at heart. The phrase of his Cotton of arms is "One, in Him one", a phrase taken from Saint Augustine. In Christ we can experience a unity that surpasses human unity, a unity founded on God's love and not on our own. The Church is one in this love. What does it mean to be united to Christ? It means that if we are united to him we are also united to his characteristics. And one of his characteristics is that of loving the poor, having become poor, identifying himself with the poor. *Dilexit Te* number 16 says: "Precisely in order to share the limitations and fragility of our human nature, he himself became poor and was born in the flesh like us." And the Popes continues: "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). And again number 103: "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. As the Body of Christ, the Church experiences the lives of the poor as her very "flesh," for theirs is a privileged place within the pilgrim people of God."

This is an invitation that Pope Leo, also following the teaching of all previous pontiffs, makes to all of us. But how can we put it into practice? At first, approaching a poor person can be frightening. We need to hear his cry and overcome fear. The story of St. Francis of Assisi can help us understand how to find courage. St. Francis had many plans for his future: he wanted to be rich, he wanted to become a knight, and he wanted to be noble. When he passed in front of the lepers, who were the poorest people of his time, he ran away and covered his nose with his hands so as not to smell them. But in time he felt a certain attraction to those lepers. He understood that they were not just people to be discarded, but men and women like him. The closer she got to Christ in prayer, the more she felt that she was not afraid of lepers, until the day she met a leper more closely and, instead of running away, decided to give him a kiss. That gesture changed him profoundly. St. Francis wrote in his will: "When I was in sins, it seemed to me too bitter a thing to see lepers, and the Lord himself led me to them and I showed mercy to them. And as I moved away from them, what seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body" (Testament, FF110).

Francis meets the poor, he meets Christ, he meets the One who can change bitter into sweet and death into life. To touch the poor is therefore to touch Christ, to live with the poor and to live with the mysterious presence of Christ among us. Pope Leo in DT number 104: " No Christian can regard the poor simply as a societal problem; they are part of our "family." They are ‘one of us’”.

In His Heart

Pope Francis left us a magnificent Encyclical Letter, *Dilexit nos*, to tell us how important it is to be united in the Heart of Christ. In fact, not only does the Lord gather us in unity and invite us to be united with the poor, but he also invites us to be one in His Heart. Pope Francis writes: “The heart of Christ is “ecstasy”, openness, gift and encounter. In that heart, we learn to relate to one another in wholesome and happy ways, and to build up in this world God’s kingdom of love and justice. Our hearts, united with the heart of Christ, are capable of working this social miracle.”² The Heart of Christ is the source of love, it transforms what it encounters.

St. Margaret Mary Alacoque recounts that she had a special encounter with the heart of Christ that changed her life. One evening in the year 1673 Jesus appeared to her in the convent to give her his first message and asked her to give him her heart: “He asked for my heart, which I asked him to take, which he did and then placed myself in his own adorable heart, from which he made me see mine like a little atom consumed in the fiery furnace of his own”.³

After this moment Sister Margaret Mary remained for a long time as if inflamed with the love of God, feeling His Presence within her until the rest of her life. In Christ's heart there was an irrepressible love that he wanted to spread in the world: “My divine Heart is so inflamed with love for men, and for you in particular, that, no longer able to contain in itself the flames of its ardent charity, it must pour them out through you and be manifested to them, in order to enrich them with its precious treasures which I now reveal to you”.⁴ We cannot inflame the world with our love alone, but Jesus can do it and he can do it through us too! Being close to his heart means being able to love like him.

I was recently told a moving testimony of some Lebanese families. In Lebanon bombings are taking place and many Christian villages have been destroyed. In a climate of hatred, Christian families

² Pope Francis, *Dilexit nos*, n. 28.

³ Ibidem n.123 or St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, Autobiography, n. 53, Roma 1983, 132.

⁴ Ibidem, n. 119 or St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, Autobiography, n. 92, Roma 1983, 180.

continue to live according to the teachings received from the Gospel. They live forgiveness and acceptance. Some Christian families have welcomed other non-Christian families into their homes. Here is what they say: "Many do not understand our ideals. Our only fault is to believe in the gospel, in forgiveness. We have welcomed poor families who do not think like us even if we know that perhaps they will not understand us and tomorrow they may continue to be hostile towards us." I was very impressed by this testimony. Only if we are united to the heart of Christ is it possible to enter into a love that changes the world. Pope Francis at the end of *Dilexit nos* offers a beautiful prayer: "I ask our Lord Jesus Christ to grant that his Sacred Heart may continue to pour forth the streams of living water that can heal the hurt we have caused, strengthen our ability to love and serve others, and inspire us to journey together towards a just, solidary and fraternal world."⁵

For the Poor

Staying united to the Heart of Christ leads us to love as he did and to hear his cry in the poor, which will be discussed better in this congress. Families united in the love of the Heart of Christ can become families with a big heart capable of welcoming the poor. It is not only a matter of bringing God to them, but of encountering him with them (cf. DT 81). Today's temptation is to put the poor on the margins of our community. Some think that it is not worth investing in the poor. Instead, we are convinced that the poor for Christians are not a sociological reality but the very flesh of Christ, and we must go out to meet him in his flesh.

Pope Francis said at the Meeting with Ecclesial Movements, at Pentecost Vigil in 2013: "This is our poverty: the poverty of the flesh of Christ, the poverty that brought the Son of God to us through his Incarnation. A poor Church for the poor begins by reaching out to the flesh of Christ. If we reach out to the flesh of Christ, we begin to understand something, to understand what this poverty, the Lord's poverty, actually is; and this is far from easy.". If we welcome Christ, our family expands. We all make plans for our future and for our family, but let me suggest the most beautiful plan: to welcome Christ into our family! To be able to welcome Christ in the poor means to enlarge the heart and happiness of the family. The Letter *Amoris Laetitia* reminds us that every family has within itself a power of love, a capacity to make this world so full of division 'domestic'.

I am very happy with this Congress because I think that if each family understands how much strength of love it has towards other families, it can do a lot. And families can do even more when they are together with priests, religious. It is the Church that manifests itself in this unity of service.

⁵ Ibidem, n 220

Welcoming the poor, learning from them, living unity with them in the heart of Christ, experiencing the joy of the Gospel. How beautiful it is when the poor are at the centre of our interest.

Pope Francis - and now also Pope Leo – wanted to show that the poor must be at the centre, in the heart of our family, of our communities. And do you know how Pope Francis did this? He called the poor to the colonnade of St. Peter's, yes the poor. He named them after his friends. In fact, during his pontificate this thing happened: many poor people began to sleep under the colonnade of St. Peter's. He gave them a place, a tent, a barber, a doctor, bathrooms for showers, food. The colonnade of St. Peter's has this meaning: it represents the arms of Mother Church that welcome every pilgrim and every man and woman. What a surprise to see that in these arms, in the heart of the most important Basilica in the world, live the poor! Poor people sometimes even strange, but they are there. And when people from all over the world arrive in Rome, what do they see together with the beauty of the Church? They see them, with their faces marked by suffering, with their simple clothes, with their toothless smiles... Perhaps few understand that with them it is Christ who welcomes them. Welcoming them means welcoming Christ. Of course, not everyone has been happy with these poor people and when you sometimes go to St. Peter's they can create a bit of embarrassment. But how big is this decision. If the Pope did this, it is to obey the Gospel.

If the Pope can do this, how much more can a family that puts the poor at the centre do. For their part, open and caring families find a place for the poor and build friendships with those less fortunate than themselves. In their efforts to live according to the Gospel, they are mindful of Jesus' words: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me (Mt 25:40)". In a very real way, their lives express what is asked of us all: "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed" (Lk 14:12-14). You will be blessed! Here is the secret to a happy family." And this is a secret for all *Couple for Christ* big family, with all the clergy, the single, the families that want to follow Jesus together.

I thank you for inviting me to take part in your Congress, and I pray that every family and every clergy be one in the Heart of Christ for the poor.