

**Formation for Religious Leadership:  
A Reflection on the Formation of Pope Leo XIV**  
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**Abstract**

This article examines how place shaped the formation of Pope Leo XIV by exploring his experiences at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and as a missionary in Peru. Through interviews with two formative colleagues, the author considers how proximity, reflective practice, and orthokardia—the cultivation of a "right heart"—form religious leaders.

**Keywords:** Pope Leo XIV, Formation, Orthokardia, Religious leadership, Reflective practice

The editors of this edition of *Reflective Practice* invited authors to “consider the relationship between place, formation for religious leadership, and reflective practice.” As a guide, the editors offered Jennifer Ayres’s definition: “A location becomes a ‘place’ when it is imbued with meaning, with histories and contestations.”<sup>1</sup> As I reflected on this invitation, I was struck by the “real-time” unfolding of this moment surrounding my “place” of ministry. Catholic Theological Union (CTU) was already a place with rich meaning and history prior to the election of Pope Leo XIV on May 8, 2025, but experiencing the catapult that propelled us into the spotlight of religious leadership was stunning.

When the “white smoke” appeared at the Vatican, I and my students joined the rest of the school for a watch party to see who the next leader of the Roman Catholic Church would be. To our amazement and sweet surprise, it was one of our own! In the same ways that people across America were amazed that the College of Cardinals had selected a pope who was a citizen of both the United States and Peru, or how Chicagoans relished the reality of a pizza-loving White Sox fan in the Vatican, we at CTU were thrilled that he was one of our alums! Yet we barely had time to blink before our lobby was filled with news cameras and questions. For the rest of the world, our little school had suddenly become *The Place!*

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As I watched President Sr. Barbara Reid, OP, deftly answer the media questions, responding in English, Spanish, or Italian as each journalist needed, I was struck by how everyone wanted a little brush with this grace. We have walked in Pope Leo XIV's footsteps, we have cheered for the same teams, and here at CTU we have even learned from some of the same professors. If he can do it, why not us?! At CTU we form leaders for the Church—and this brush with fame reminded us of our responsibility in that important call!

This article is a reflection on place and the formation of religious leadership. Although the number of articles and books on Pope Leo XIV and his rise to leadership is continuing to grow, I want to explore how the leadership of Pope Leo might have been shaped through the formation and reflective practices he experienced in two places: (1) CTU, with its intentional placement in the city of Chicago, and (2) Peru, where he spent years as a missionary. To do this, I have had the privilege of speaking with two people from different points in his life, both of whom he continues to stay in touch with today. I began my conversation with Sr. Thérèse DelGenio, SNDdeN, on September 17, 2025. Sr. Thérèse was one of my predecessors as the director of field education at CTU during the time Pope Leo, then Robert Prevost, OSA, was a student here. Not only was she the director of field education, but she was also his site supervisor in his ministry practicum with St. Victor Parish. Thus, she saw him both in classroom settings at CTU and in ministry at St. Victor's. I also had the opportunity to talk with Fr. John Lydon, OSA, on October 14, 2025. Fr. Lydon is currently the formator for the Augustinian students at CTU. He has recently returned from forty years on mission in Peru, and for ten of those years he worked alongside then Fr. Robert Prevost. To be clear, I have not interviewed Pope Leo XIV; I am simply reflecting on the formative elements of the places he has been to consider how place and reflective practice form a religious leader.

This reflection explores contextual background of each place to consider the people, the place, and the contextual landscapes at play during his time there. I lean heavily on my two conversation partners for their perspectives, and I then consider if we, today, are still doing what is essential to shape the next generation of leaders that the people of God need. CTU has had the "tag line" of Bold and Faithful for years. and these reflections allow me to ask what makes this "place" *still* bold and faithful today. Reflecting on the journey of one person's rise to religious leadership allows us to consider the responsibility we have to keep cultivating that ground for others to follow in his footsteps—perhaps not all the way through Peru to Rome, but certainly the footsteps that helped Fr. Prevost to say "Yes."

#### A PLACE: CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL UNION

In 1977, the year Robert Prevost, OSA, started as a student at CTU, the school was only nine years old! After Vatican II, and inspired by Cardinal Leo Josef Suenens, who had been a prominent figure at Vatican II, the dean of the University of Chicago Divinity

School “urged that a Catholic school of theology be founded in Hyde Park.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to the Divinity School, the other schools in Hyde Park at that time included Lutheran School of Theology and McCormick Seminary. The inspiration was that a school of theology should not be located far from the needs of their community but rather should be immersed in the place they serve. In that vision and in the hope of building ecumenical dialogue with the other theological schools concentrated in Hyde Park, three communities of men religious (the Passionists, Franciscans, and Servites) decided to form a union of their three schools and settle in the city. As more communities joined the union, CTU built a strong foundation in missiology that has become a cornerstone of the school’s ethos. The Catholic Jewish Studies program began in 1968, and CTU welcomed women and lay students in 1972.<sup>3</sup> A Catholic Muslim Studies program came later, and over the years more religious communities, including the Augustinians, joined the union. Currently, twenty-one communities send their men to CTU for their priesthood studies. Roughly ten women’s religious communities send their women to CTU, and half of the student body is made up of lay men and women. The students at CTU come from all over the world, with as many as 40% of the student body from outside the United States. Interreligious dialogue, intercultural competencies and attention to the community in which it stands are all critical pieces of CTU’s educational standards.

It is into this setting that Robert Prevost came as a young Augustinian friar. He took Old Testament from Sr. Dianne Bergant, CSA, Catholic Social Teaching from Fr. John Pawlikowski, OSM, and Liturgy from Fr. Gil Ostdiek, OFM, all of whom taught at CTU until only a few years ago. Students are encouraged to be involved in ministry placements throughout their studies, but they also have a degree requirement for a credit-bearing yearlong course in field education. This ministry practicum course engages them in theological reflection on their ministry. The formative experiences that take place in this year are critical for the integrative work in theological education. Theological reflection in small cohorts of diverse peers is where the questions, doubts, triumphs, and concerns of ministry are brought for reflection; here, their operative theologies are named and strengthened or critiqued; here, their presumptions, biases, gifts, and growing edges are exposed and reimagined.

As a Catholic institution, we are somewhat unusual in that our priesthood candidates sit in these cohorts (and all their classes) alongside lay men and women, religious sisters and brothers and people of different faith traditions. When Cardinal Prevost entered the conclave in early May 2025, he might have been one of only a few men there who had studied theology alongside lay women and men, as well as one of only a few who would have learned Scripture or pastoral theology from woman professors.

Pope Francis’s image of the church as a field hospital has resonated with all of us at CTU. The decision to move from the rural retreat settings of the founding seminaries to a union nestled in the city was a move to the community. To move from within our

classrooms to the spaces of ministry and to be known by those on the peripheries has also been critical for the connection between our place of study and our place in the community. In the '70s and '80s, during Prevost's time at CTU, Chicago was experiencing the loss of steel and other manufacturing jobs and race-related movements that saw large groups of the white population in Chicago move to the suburbs. This loss of jobs and population set the stage for further divisions and distrust.

In this setting, Sr. Thérèse DelGenio became a formative conversation partner for Prevost. Sr. Thérèse had been working on homelessness in nearby Gary, Indiana, when she received a call from Fr. Leo Mahon, a new pastor at St. Victor's Parish in Calumet City just south of Chicago. In 1962, Fr. Leo had been one of a few priests of the Archdiocese of Chicago whom Cardinal Meyer asked to establish a parish in Panama. As a document in the Chicago Archdiocesan archives states, "Motivated by Pope John XXIII's call for established dioceses to send aid to the Church in Latin America, Albert Cardinal Meyer, Archbishop of Chicago, sent Fr. Leo Mahon to scout a location for a diocesan mission. In 1962, Cardinal Meyer committed to sending a team of priests to oversee a parish in Panama."<sup>4</sup>

Fr. Leo Mahon's time in Panama, where he worked with base ecclesial movements, must have shaped his work in the Archdiocese of Chicago. As Sr. Thérèse remembers, "When I first started working at St. Victor, we were a motley crew of priests, five sisters, a couple of seminarians, and some wonderful laypeople. He said to us three things at that first staff meeting: "One, you are not here to bring the light of Christ to these people, they already have it; you are just here to fan the flames. Two, if you don't fall in love with the people, get out of the business. And three, I do not want you to do anything for a year." Well, you know, the five of us sisters nearly fell on the floor! . . . He said, "We're going to divide the parish up like a pie. You're all going to get a slice, and you visit the people in your slice, get to know them and find out what they think they need, not what *you* think they need."<sup>5</sup>

Fr. Mahon, a priest who had been shaped by his time in Panama to empower and encourage a parish community to be a vibrant place of ministry, thus established the dynamic setting that Prevost stepped into as a CTU student for his ministry practicum placement. As Sr. Thérèse noted, "At that time, many of the priesthood candidates wanted parish placements that had them in traditional roles, but he chose to come to St. Victor's to work with our St. Victor Outreach Ministry, which ministered to substance abusers and their families." Students are encouraged to focus on what they hope to learn from the community they accompany. She noted that his experience there helped him to learn, among other things:

the symptoms of progression in the disease of alcoholism and drug addiction, the effects of the addiction problem on the family, the knowledge of various treatment centers in the Chicagoland area, their locations, their contact persons and phone numbers for admission of a parishioner to the facility, the symptoms of recovery for the substance abuser as well as for the family, and how to facilitate an intervention.

From the beginning, Prevost had a commitment to learn what it meant to serve at the peripheries. He had a heart of compassion, and Sr. Thérèse could see it in his time among the people.

Sr. Thérèse and Pope Leo XIV still correspond, and I asked her which one of them keeps in touch. She said it takes two. If a student writes her a letter, she writes back, and the relationship just keeps building. At a recent CTU event, one of Pope Leo's classmates, Judy Connelly, the first female student to graduate from CTU with a master's in divinity degree, noted that he kept in touch with her too. This willingness to keep connected to people says a lot about someone. The connections made in his time at CTU and working with Sr. Thérèse and Fr. Mahon at St. Victor's for his field placement were surely formative for his understanding of himself as a minister, Augustinian missionary, and leader in the church. In one interview, Pope Leo was asked why he chose the name Leo. His response was, "There are different reasons for this," he said, explaining that he chose the name Leo "mainly because Pope Leo XIII, in his historic encyclical *Rerum novarum* addressed the social question in the context of the first great industrial revolution."<sup>6</sup> I can't help but wonder if one of the "different reasons" is from his time working with Sr. Thérèse under the leadership of Fr. Leo Mahon.

#### A PLACE: PERU

Pope Leo XIV's fellow Augustinian, Fr. John Lydon, OSA, talked about the how these types of practicum placements reshaped his own ministerial identity as well. "When I entered the Augustinians, I originally thought I would become a political science professor at Villanova,"<sup>7</sup> he said. But an encounter with someone at his ministry site where he was helping folks acquire their GED "made me realize the disparities in educational opportunity and called me to work with the poor." He noted that within the Augustinian order, priests and brothers are not required to go outside the United States on mission. You are invited to volunteer if you feel called. After that encounter during his practicum, he decided he would volunteer for one year in Peru. He adds, "I stayed for forty!"

During Fr. Lydon's time in Peru, he worked alongside then Fr. Prevost on several projects. In 1988, they opened the Augustinian house of formation in the Archdiocese of Trujillo. Prior to their years there together, Fr. Prevost had been in Chulucanas helping to set up the change from prelate to diocese, and he eventually served as the diocesan chancellor. In 1990, the two Augustinians were placed as a team working with two "quasi-parishes" in Trujillo; Fr. Lydon explained that they were not yet juridical parishes as the diocese was still in the process of forming parish structures. Fr. Prevost was administrator of the two communities. He and Fr. Lydon worked together there from 1990 to 1999. The communities were large: Santa Maria/Santa Rita had roughly 1,000 families in it, and Monte Serrat had roughly 5,000 families. Fr. Lydon averred that they developed their pastoral plan for these communities in much the same way that Fr.

Prevost had seen in his time in Chulucanas. They divided the parish into zones, and each zone had teams of lay people, seminarians, and others who addressed the pastoral needs of the community. “Ninety percent of the pastoral work that was done in that time was done by the laity,” Fr. Lydon noted. “The Peruvian people formed us as pastors, through their religious traditions and inviting us to think differently. I learned the value of simple presence. Amid the need and poverty, there was great love and welcome. They have an abundance of God’s grace.”

I asked Fr. Lydon about his and Fr. Prevost’s experiences of theological reflection during this time. I wanted to see if the threads of how we highlight theological reflection as a critical tool for ministry were woven into their practice of ministerial leadership in Peru. “It was the *Hilo Conductor*,” he smiled, “The thread that ties us all together!” He said they had regular reflections with the lay teams and Augustinian students. He quickly recited the phrase, “*Ver, juzgar, actuar* [See, judge, act]. We met in these teams and reflected together. This was our way of forming the pastoral plan for each month.”

“You have to remember what Peru was like in those days,” he went on. “The ‘90s was a difficult time. There were terrorist movements, a lot of violence, curfews . . .” He explained that this was the social backdrop for much of what they found themselves involved in as Augustinians and in communion with the people. He talked about the marches and protests they participated in and the music some of their friars wrote for those movements. In particular, he recalled that 1998 was the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “We were involved in a campaign to get signatures to promote the absolute value of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to request that the government begin to respect human rights.” He noted that because their communities were so well organized by the laity, they got the most signatures of any organization for that effort. “We were a synodal church already back in the ‘90s.” As I listen to Fr. Lydon speak of their time in Peru, I can’t help but hear the rhythms of that time in the message of Pope Leo XIV’s first apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te*: “God has a special place in his heart for those who are discriminated against and oppressed, and he asks us, his church, to make a decisive and radical choice in favor of the weakest.”<sup>8</sup>

The first time the Catholic Church used the phrase “option for the poor” was in the 1968 Medellin document by the Latin American bishops. Since then, Catholic social teaching has developed this theology to turn the Church’s focus. With *Dilexi Te*, Pope Leo XIV is amplifying the call for the Church today to make a radical choice in favor of those on the peripheries.

### STILL BOLD AND FAITHFUL

These reflections and stories have me considering the various places of theological education, and of field education in particular, that play a critical part in the formation of religious leaders today. I would like to explore a couple of different “places.” The first—proximity—is the movement from one’s place of familiarity to the places of encounter.

The second—the “places” of reflective practice—is comprised of the site supervisors, mentors, formators, teachers, community members, and classmates along with the pedagogical structures that encourage this movement and students’ reflection on these encounters. Finally, *orthokardia*—the heart work where our students as well as ourselves reshape our hearts for ministry—is the “place” that is the heart of formation.

### *Proximity*

“Decisive and radical choices in favor of the weakest.” That is what we are asked to discern as a community and as individual disciples. The parallels between the community organizing elements utilized both at St. Victor’s and in Peru were surely impacted by the base ecclesial movements of Central and South America. Both parish structures operated in ways that encouraged their leaders to get close to the community, to listen as they articulated their needs, and to partner with them in seeking solutions.

Proximity is a critical place for religious formation. Learning how to be in proximity to those on the peripheries and also in proximity to those who have authority are important skills to build and navigate. As we have seen in the stories shared above and probably in our own experiences as well, the encounter with another often draws us closer and invites us deeper. The ability to stand in those places of marginalization and help leverage the focus on their needs is an important task of religious leaders. Pope Francis, in an interview in 2013 with Anthony Spadaro, SJ, discussed proximity when he introduced his image of the Church as a field hospital: “The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital.”<sup>9</sup>

In formation for religious leadership, this movement toward those on the margins allows students to see clearly not only how they can respond to the needs of the faithful but also how the capacity of their own heart grows in such encounters. Small encounters reshape and invite us to new perspectives and encounters. The choice to work with those experiencing substance abuse or the encounter that forces us to see the disparities in education is a grace-filled moment that compels us to leave our comfort zone. As Pope Francis said in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “Life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others.”<sup>10</sup>

Field education is the natural spot within theological education for encouraging, compelling, and at times even requiring students to “leave security on the shore.” Those decisive movements to be near the people of God are important steps in shaping the hearts of ministerial leaders.

### *Reflective Practice*

In addition to proximity, our pedagogy needs to create the space for sacred conversations and reflection. Reflective practice winds itself into the core of how we do pastoral

planning, how we understand our encounters with one another, and how we invite others to consider their own leadership and authoritative voice. This is exactly the model of synodal listening that Pope Francis sought to cultivate and what Pope Leo XIV is continuing to teach. As a guideline on synodal listening states:

This quality of attention is an act of respecting, welcoming, and being hospitable to others as they are. It is an approach that takes seriously what happens in the hearts of those who are conversing. . . . Ultimately, this interior attentiveness makes us more aware of the presence and participation of the Holy Spirit in the process of sharing and discernment.<sup>11</sup>

Field education must be accompanied by theological reflection, which is critical in the formation of religious leaders. Sr. Thérèse set into place numerous other pieces in the late '70s that are still woven into the reflective fabric of field education at CTU today. These include the push to cultivate ministry options outside of the traditional parish or school settings, the space carved out for diverse learning cohorts to reflect on their ministry and develop learning agreements that help students articulate what they hope to “learn” from the community they will accompany rather than what they will “do” in their placements. The language choice offers a balance of humility to the power dynamic of students, who come from various places of privilege and authority. Learning agreements also help to cultivate a heart of understanding oneself as a lifelong learner, open to where the Spirit might lead.

Another important piece of reflective practice in field education is surrounding the students with good mentors. The site supervisors are the ones who help the students enter the community with authenticity, craft learning agreements, and provide a sounding board that notices learning edges and encourages growth. The faculty who lead students in their theological reflection cohorts, the formators who engage with them about their spiritual paths, and the team of unsung heroes behind the scenes who help students corral their required paperwork and remind them to breathe are all mentors for our students. By surrounding them with trained and dedicated mentors, we are exposing them to varied reflective conversations in multiple places so they will build a habit of reflection that will continue to shape their ministerial identity for years to come.

### *Orthokardia*

If we have moved our students and our educational settings to places at the peripheries and have carved out places for reflection and sacred conversations along the way, the next landscape to be explored is the integration that takes place in their hearts. To explore this, I come at it from two directions. First, I weave together some definitions to flesh out the notion of *orthokardia* and how we might cultivate such hearts in our students, and then I also explore how my students have challenged and changed my own heart.

We are familiar with *orthodoxy*, meaning “right doctrine,” and our theological schools are adept at teaching this. Even *orthopraxis* (“right action”) is a familiar concept and can be developed in a variety of ministerial and educational settings. But underneath

it all, at the heart of it all, is the question of *orthokardia*. What does it mean to have a “right heart” in ministry? John Wesley first spoke of heart religion, and others such as Capuchin-Franciscan Edward Foley define it by saying, “The work of *orthokardia* demands more. . . . This moral sensitivity, grounded in humility, tunes us to the dignity of all people and the potential for good that resides in every heart.”<sup>12</sup>

Jennifer Ayres, in her book *Inhabittance: Ecological Religious Education*, wrestles with the same question of how to teach this nuance:

Tucked into this theological and ecclesial exuberance is an implicit operative educational theory: once the right fact, or idea, or insight has been transmitted, lives will be changed. A correlate theoretical approach goes this way: once the right experience or learning activity has been facilitated, lives will be changed. Learning, however, is about far more than transmission of content. Likewise, it is about more than a powerful experience. It is a dynamic and relational process, full of nuance and mystery.<sup>13</sup>

In her efforts to name this type of learning and how it is learned, Ayres offers a definition of phronetic wisdom: it “does the slow and steady work of shaping and directing human dispositions so that even human affections (in addition to their thoughts and actions) are attuned to God’s presence and persuasion in the world.”<sup>14</sup>

Each of these definitions attest to the important work of integration and transformation that takes place when we put students in proximity to those in need and we carve out space for their reflective work. However, we recognize that the right pieces alone do not always lead to *orthokardia*.

In an address on the Jubilee of the World of Education, Pope Leo XIV offers insights on St. Augustine’s use of the word “interiority” as the place where the Spirit teaches our hearts, saying that this happens in encounter.<sup>15</sup> This hints at the work of the Spirit to transform us. *Orthokardia* is not just a glimpse of grace; we need to offer the right ingredients for our hearts to be kneaded, reshaped, and guided by the Spirit for mission.

Ayres also offers a reimagining of the ancient Greek understanding of *paideia* as “the process by which learners’ ‘whole personality’ and character were formed and deliberately guided in order to prepare them for service in society.”<sup>16</sup> This reimagining, which is influenced by Paulo Freire’s notion of “critical consciousness,” incorporates critical literacy.<sup>17</sup> Ayres writes that “character formation for ecological and social responsibility must include the essential capacities to critique and transform social structures—and even the very values and modes of education itself.”<sup>18</sup> Pope Leo XIV writes of this deep learning as well in his apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te*:

Our love and our deepest convictions need to be continually cultivated, and we do so through our concrete actions. Remaining in the realm of ideas and theories, while failing to give them expression through frequent and practical acts of charity, will eventually cause even our most cherished hopes and aspirations to weaken and fade away.<sup>19</sup>

These various definitions flesh out my understanding of *orthokardia*. My own work, *Surprised by God: Teaching Reflection through the Parables*, insists that reflection done

well causes us to be “parabled” or flipped on our heads by the nearness and demands of our God.<sup>20</sup> This disposition to be “parabled” is *orthokardia*—trusting the work of the Spirit to form a critical consciousness to critique and reshape structures for the common good of society. This is how the heart of a religious leader is cultivated. *Orthokardia* is taught in proximity and in reflective practice but also in and through love, the love of God for us and our own love for those we accompany. Hearts are reshaped, kneaded, and formed through love. Pope Leo, in his address on the Jubilee of World Education, stated, “Sharing knowledge is not enough for teaching: love is needed. Only then will knowledge be beneficial to those who receive it, in itself and above all, for the charity it conveys. Teaching should never be separated from love.”<sup>21</sup>

I have seen *orthokardia* grow over the years in my own identity as a minister. In the course of any academic year, I meet with my students individually—to get to know them, to help them see what they need to learn in their ministry, and to try to adapt the structures to offer them support rooted in justice on their educational journey. I try to model for them the type of proximity and reflective practice that I ask them to navigate by meeting them where they are and adapting to their needs.

Some of the ways we have had to adapt and embrace justice as we accompany our students are in the myriads of places that field education has taken place. One student was deported due to U.S. administrative rule changes during his studies, and we observed as he embraced the immigration camp across the border as his “called to” place for ministry. Another student was detained, again not because of any wrongdoing on his part but due to clerical errors, and he found his months in detention a profound place of ministry. He missed his own diaconal ordination while there but saw the sacramental resonance of his calling come into clearer view in that space. We have accompanied students who explored their call to stand with those in the LGBTQ+ community and hold space for them within our Church. We have even recently adapted to accept a student who is a prisoner and are working with him to use the practice of restorative justice circles while in prison as his place of field education. Students have adapted to do ministry in a variety of nontraditional settings across the world as well as in digital spaces such as during COVID-19, and at each step we redefine the place where learning happens. In each place, we adapt to accompany our students and help cultivate the spaces of reflection and proximity to support the work of the Spirit in their own hearts.

In these scenarios, I come back to the heart of each student and the keys I look for as they develop *orthokardia*: their commitment to “smell like the sheep,” as Pope Francis put it,<sup>22</sup> their ability to critique the power structures that create gaps in power, and their deep love. St. Oscar Romero, in a homily on March 9, 1980, just two weeks before he was killed, proclaimed, “The great need today is for Christians who are active and critical, who don’t accept situations without analyzing them inwardly and deeply.”<sup>23</sup> And earlier, on April 12, 1979, he said, “A civilization of love that did not demand justice of people

would not be a true civilization . . . true love begins by demanding what is just.”<sup>24</sup> He called for the integration of a heart of love and justice.

In all these moments and in all these adaptations, I find myself loving my students. Truly. I see it in my colleagues too; the culture of CTU is imbued with the love we have for our students as well as for the people of God to whom our students will someday be sent. Love, I have come to believe, is the most bold and faithful way of forming religious leaders.

Pope Leo XIV’s first apostolic exhortation is titled *Dilexi Te*, which translates to “I Have Loved You,” and I find great resonance with what he has written and what goes into the development of *orthokardia* for religious leadership. As I consider here how place has shaped his religious leadership, I believe this first exhortation offers a glimpse of how much CTU and Peru might have shaped him. Thus, it seems only fitting to let him have the last word. So, I end with the final paragraphs of *Dilexi Te*:

Christian love breaks down every barrier, brings close those who were distant, unites strangers, and reconciles enemies. It spans chasms that are humanly impossible to bridge, and it penetrates to the most hidden crevices of society. By its very nature, Christian love is prophetic: it works miracles and knows no limits. It makes what was apparently impossible happen. Love is above all a way of looking at life and a way of living it. A Church that sets no limits to love, that knows no enemies to fight but only men and women to love, is the Church that the world needs today.

Through your work, your efforts to change unjust social structures or your simple, heartfelt gesture of closeness and support, the poor will come to realize that Jesus’ words are addressed personally to each of them: “I have loved you” (*Rev* 3:9).

*Given in Rome, at Saint Peter’s, on 4 October, the Memorial of Saint Francis of Assisi, in the year 2025, the first of my Pontificate.*<sup>25</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Ayres, *Inhabitation: Ecological Religious Education* (Baylor University Press, 2019), 88.

<sup>2</sup> “Our Story,” Catholic Theological Union, accessed October 25, 2025, <https://ctu.edu/ctu-story/>.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Bechtold, *Catholic Theological Union at Chicago: The Founding Years, History and Memoir* (Catholic Theological Union, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> “San Miguelito,” Archdiocese of Chicago, Archives and Records, accessed October 25, 2025, <https://archives.archchicago.org/photo-exhibit/san-miguelito>.

<sup>5</sup> Sr. Thérèse DelGenio, SNDdeN, interview by Christina R. Zaker, September 17, 2025. All quotes of Sr. Thérèse are from this interview.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Wells, “Leo XIII’s Times and Our Own,” *Vatican News*, accessed November 1, 2025, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2025-05/leo-xiii-s-times-and-our-own.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Fr. John Lydon, OSA, interview by Christina R. Zaker, October 14, 2025. All quotes of Fr. Lydon are from this interview.

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<sup>8</sup> Leo XIV, *Dilexi Te* [I have loved you], October 4, 2025, §16, [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>9</sup> Spadaro, Antonio, "Interview with Pope Francis," The Vatican, accessed October 25, 2025. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130921\\_intervista-spadaro.html/](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html/).

<sup>10</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* [The joy of the gospel] (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013), para. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Synod of Bishops, "The Spiritual Conversation," n.d., Vatican Synod, accessed November 1, 2025, [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN\\_Step\\_6\\_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN_Step_6_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Edward Foley, *Theological Reflection across Religious Traditions: The Turn to Reflective Believing* (Roman & Littlefield, 2015), 76.

<sup>13</sup> Ayres, *Inhabitanace*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Ayres, *Inhabitanace*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Leo XIV, *Address to the Jubilee of the World of Education*, The Vatican, October 25, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/october/documents/20251031-giubileo-educatori.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Ayres, *Inhabitanace*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Paulo Freire discusses critical consciousness in his 1968 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The first English translation was published by Herder and Herder in 1970.

<sup>18</sup> Ayres, *Inhabitanace*, 62.

<sup>19</sup> Leo XIV, *Dilexi Te*, §119.

<sup>20</sup> Christina R. Zaker, *Surprised by God: Teaching Reflection through the Parables* (Roman & Littlefield, 2020), 60–61.

<sup>21</sup> Leo XIV, *Address to the Jubilee of the World of Education*.

<sup>22</sup> See Francis, *Chrism Mass: Homily of Pope Francis*, The Holy See, March 28, 2013, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130328\\_messa-crismale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html).

<sup>23</sup> Saint Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero from Homilies, Letters, Interviews, and Articles of the Martyred Archbishop of San Salvador*, trans. and comp. James R. Brockman, SJ (Harper and Row, 1988), 236.

<sup>24</sup> Romero, *The Violence of Love*, 157.

<sup>25</sup> Leo XIV, *Dilexi Te*, § 120–121.