

“Where deceit and disguise have no place”: Dilexit nos as a hermeneutical lens in appreciating the heart of Nicaea “Onde o engano e o disfarce não têm lugar”: Dilexit nos como lente hermenêutica na apreciação do coração de Niceia

Michael Canaris¹

Abstract

This essay examines the indispensable contributions of Nicaea through the lens of *Dilexit nos*, pope Francis’s farewell discourse on the role of the heart in a word increasingly coarsened and cruel. It argues that Nicaea can be meaningful, comprehensible, and evocative to people of the 21st century, if understood through the hermeneutical lens of the encyclical. Not simply an intellectual enterprise, trinitarian theology of Nicaea expresses and demonstrates the heart of faith 1) as a testament to ongoing synodality; 2) in the venerable ancient council’s ability to address in profound and real ways the “depreciation of the deep core of our humanity”, as Francis names the perennial human situation; and 3) in the co-cooperative elements of reparation which *Dilexit nos* encourages.

Keywords

Council of Nicaea. Dilexit nos. Pope Francis. Synodality. Catholic social thought.

Resumo

Este ensaio examina as contribuições indispensáveis de Nicéia através da lente da *Dilexit nos*, o discurso de despedida do papa Francisco sobre o papel do coração em um mundo cada vez mais grosseiro e cruel. Argumenta que Niceia pode ser significativa, compreensível e evocativa para as pessoas do século XXI, se compreendida através da lente hermenêutica da encíclica. Não sendo simplesmente um empreendimento intelectual, a teologia trinitária de Niceia expressa e demonstra a essência da fé 1) como um testemunho da sinodalidade em curso; 2) na capacidade do venerável concílio de abordar de forma profunda e real a “desvalorização do centro íntimo” da nossa humanidade, como Francisco denomina a perene situação humana; e 3) nos elementos cooperativos de reparação que *Dilexit nos* encoraja.

Palavras-chave

Concílio de Niceia. Dilexit nos. Papa Francisco. Sinodalidade. Pensamento social católico.

INTRODUCTION

Archeologists have certainly unearthed countless human artifacts dating to periods much older than one thousand, seven hundred years ago. But relatively few of such relics from the mists of history continue to inform the ongoing cultural, religious, political, and even socio-economic lives of more than a billion members of the human family into our day. Christians across the broad and variegated landscape of denominational families and communities are now marking the inauguration of an eighteenth century of influence of the expressions and

¹ Doutor e mestre em Teologia Sistemática pela Fordham University. Bacharel em Filosofia e em Teologia pela University of Scranton. Professor da Loyola University Chicago. Contato: mcanaris@luc.edu.

formulations elucidated at the Council of Nicaea, in modern-day Turkey. Of course, the event served not as a definitive end to all questions of christology, but rather as a liminal entrance to its unfolding and sometimes labyrinthine history of effects, (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) (Gadamer, 1986, p. 268); something on par with what the theologian Karl Rahner once said about its sister event, Chalcedon (Rahner, 1961, p. 149-200). For many theologians, whether interested in systematic speculation about the incarnation, historical analyses of Christendom's Constantinian roots and its eventual unmooring from those excesses, or ecumenical dialogues focused on a commitment to the path to Christian unity, the first ecumenical council serves as a rich vein of intellectual, doctrinal, and historical source material. The goal of this essay would never be so presumptuous as to call that into question. Rather, I wish instead to engage here in a complementary, and not merely supplementary, project.

When, in October 2024, pope Francis decided to write what would end up being his last encyclical letter addressed to the entire planet during the tumultuous closing days of his pontificate, the theme he chose was: “the human and divine love of Jesus Christ” (DN 54) – note the ordering of the opening words in the text's subtitle, which will not be unimportant for us in the pages that follow). Taking the title, *Dilexit nos*, from a slight phrasal reworking of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans 8,37, pope Francis sought in this piece to reinvigorate devotion to the sacred heart of Jesus, particularly as a holistic symbol laden with a multivalence of interpretive resonances. However, the first Latin American pontiff presented his aims and methodologies in a trajectory far different from pope Pius XII's *Haurietis aquas*, not necessarily because of a quantitative shift in the affective bonds experienced by believers with the *corazón* of Jesus Christ, but rather because of the frenetic pace of a “liquid” and exaggerated “rational-technological” world context that had to his mind become in many ways “heartless” (DN 9, 17). It is my contention here that this programmatic, thoroughly modern encyclical text can serve as a hermeneutical lens through which to appreciate the storied contributions of Nicaea today and make it meaningful, comprehensible, and evocative to people of the 21st century. I would then argue that *Dilexit nos* can shed light not only on the “meeting of the minds” of the ancient bishops who hammered a christological vision out of a crucible of deep division, but even more so as a recognition that these were and are expressions of the heart of faith – as much or more than they are cerebral solutions to knotty theological and philosophical difficulties.

When the International Theological Commission, as currently impaneled by Francis, published its memorial text: *Jesus Christ, Son of God, savior: 1700th anniversary of the ecumenical Council of Nicaea, 325-2025*, the authors highlighted this holistic approach, which still has relevance for us today: “to ‘believe’ in the Church and to ‘confess’ a single baptism is to receive a gift of faith which makes it possible for believers to discern at the very heart of their human and fragile dimension the active and sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit” (International Theological Commission, 2025, n. 41). We see here the integrative contribution of theologies of reception, which have marked so much of 20th and 21st century Catholic

“Where deceit and disguise have no place”

theology, particularly in the works of Congar, Rahner, Grillmeier, Gaillardetz, Murray, Imperatori-Lee, Rush, Scannone, Luciani, and Lennan. This dynamic, agential, active protagonism involved in authentic reception, to which these and many other authors consistently return, molds and describes a proper appropriation of the church’s teachings and Tradition, along with many other symbols of the faith, as more than mere memorization and regurgitation. A carefully-trained parrot reciting the teachings of Nicaea would, for instance, certainly neither be moved in its heart to the Lord, nor be said to be praying the creed!²

Pope Francis makes this point exceedingly clear in *Dilexit nos*, when he defines the heart as the locus of all sincerity, a region from which I have taken the title of this essay: “where deceit and disguise have no place” (DN 4). This takes on new meaning in a world seemingly careening between polarities: atheism and fundamentalism, transnational corporatism and xenophobic nationalism, unchecked market capitalism and overbearing statism engaged in untold human rights violations. How can we in such a time of epochal change speak meaningfully of a unifying creed that connects an important – but also ultimately fumbling and provisional – human attempt to describe the infinite via intellectual concepts with the absolute center of our existence which ultimately concerns our hearts, where the masks of deceit and disguise fall away? The answer lies in recognizing Nicaea’s ongoing contribution to a collective Christian response to the metastasizing challenges of our day. This will take on three forms in this piece. First, in distinguishing and appreciating the explicitly synodal dimensions of the effort. Second, in the venerable ancient council’s ability to address in profound and real ways the “depreciation of the deep core of our humanity” (DN 10), as Francis names the situation. And third, the co-cooperative elements of reparation which *Dilexit nos* encourages (particularly in DN 181-204).

1 NICAEA AS AN EXPRESSION OF LIVING SYNODALITY

St. John Chrysostom famously implied that church and synod are synonymous, as the former denotes both *systema* (gathering) and *synodos* (co-traveling). As the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church has put it: “from the first ecumenical council (Nicaea, 325) onwards, major questions regarding faith and canonical order in the Church were discussed and resolved by the ecumenical councils. Though the bishop of Rome was not personally present at any of those councils, in each case either he was represented by his legates or he agreed with the council’s conclusions post factum. The Church’s understanding of the criteria for the reception of a council as ecumenical developed over the course of the first millennium” (International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox

² Of course, such a playful image ought not to be read as denigrating the inter-related web of creation, nor our responsibility to care for our common home, including the birds of the air and fish of the sea (Johnson, 2015), and, of course, pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato si’*.

Church, 2016, n. 18). We see here once again the indispensable dimension of reception as central to the issue at hand.

An ecclesiological commitment to synodality is then an ongoing recognition of many of the threads which weave together the texts and visions in this journal, both in this particular volume and beyond: authentic dialogue, *caminando juntos*, mutual listening with intention and attention, the unmuzzling of voices which have been heretofore excluded from and by a eurocentric exportative vision of Christianity, a groaning together of the entire earth along with those conscious beings on it that Abraham Heschel once described as “cantors of the universe” (Johnson, 2024, p. 60). The ongoing impact of Nicaea in our day continues to argue for a synodal approach to questions of soteriology, anthropology, and moral theology, ones not petrified in the hardened amber of the past but as yeasts yearning for space to proof and bloom today, in an age in which no previous Christians have ever lived or faced identical difficulties.

Dilexit nos (58) sheds light on this reality:

we must never forget that the image of the heart speaks to us of the flesh and of earthly realities. In this way, it points us to the God who wished to become one of us, a part of our history, and a companion on our earthly journey. A more abstract or stylized form of devotion would not necessarily be more faithful to the Gospel, for in this eloquent and tangible sign we see how God willed to reveal himself and to draw close to us.

While Nicaea’s Greek philosophical terms may at times be mischaracterized as “abstract” and “stylized”, in fact, they are instead testimonies to the companion experienced both alongside the road and in the literal “bread-with” of the disciples of Emmaus. The tangibility and proximity expressed both in the council and the recent encyclical are *sine quibus non* for the ongoing collective discernment that marks genuine synodality, and as they have done in each subsequent council and ecclesial expression of shared investigation, deduction, and dialogical unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*).

While synodality involves elements of reform and re-imagination, it is ultimately a process of creative fidelity in receiving the insights of the Spirit, which blows where she will, the chief *protagonista* in its process. Pope Francis in some ways simply widened the aperture on the discussion methodologies, participants and ends of ecclesial conversation, moving away from a static and propositional framing that would posit such a Spirit finished inspiring the community to generative and life-giving interpretive responses seventeen hundred, or four hundred, or sixty years ago. To engage the Spirit at work in our day is simply to live out in our unique times the commandment of Matthew 22,37 to its fullest, which notably puts loving God with one’s “heart” and “soul”, ahead of one’s “mind”. The authors at Nicaea were engaged in precisely such an endeavor, albeit in modes of discussion largely conditioned by the culture of the day, but recognizing the pastoral needs of a community marred by disarray, polemical excesses, and contentious tribalism. Yet, the answers did not impose unity in the mode of

“Where deceit and disguise have no place”

uniformity, or eradicate the diversity and pluralism that marbled the Christian experience at least since the “council” of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Any notion that the developing trinitarian theology of the 4th century eliminated the geographical, theological, cultural, linguistic, or conceptual diversity of the following decades and centuries is entirely ahistorical. *Dilexit nos*, along with Francis’s more architectonic agenda, reminds us of the unfolding love affair between God and all that is not God in the post-resurrection life of Christian communities.

2 NICAIA AS ADDRESSING THE “DEPRECIATION OF THE DEEP CORE OF OUR HUMANITY”

Pope Francis argues that the depreciation of the heart as a “deep core of our humanity” (DN 10) predates what he describes as the contemporary “liquid” (DN 9) society. That is to say, concepts of things like intelligence, will, freedom, and rationality have for generations too often superseded the focus on holistic formation represented by language and ecclesial imaginations about the heart.

If we devalue the heart, we also devalue what it means to speak from the heart, to act with the heart, to cultivate and heal the heart. If we fail to appreciate the specificity of the heart, we miss the messages that the mind alone cannot communicate; we miss out on the richness of our encounters with others; we miss out on poetry. We also lose track of history and our own past, since our real personal history is built with the heart. At the end of our lives, that alone will matter. (DN 11).

We see here a prime example of what Bernard V. Brady calls the most recent of three overlapping and interconnected phases in the narrative of Catholic social thought arising since Leo XIII, namely the period from John Paul II through the pontificate of Francis where increasing attention has been paid to affective, emotive, and inter-relational catalysts for justice and societal change. Through such efforts that ground and animate moral growth and transformation of persons beyond moral principles about dignity and human rights, “Catholic ‘social thought,’ then, transforms into Catholic ‘social living’” (Brady, 2018, p. 342). This recent phase (and, what we might call the genuine development) of Christian thinking across the last three pontificates highlighted themes represented by increasing usage of words like “love”, “heart”, “sensing”, “feeling”, “crying” (with or without the complementary “out”) and “touching” more than the previous stages in Brady’s analysis. We can also surmise that the intrinsically societal, communal, and, therefore, *de facto* political elements are found embedded throughout the Tradition, including in the Nicene assemblies.

Nicaea, in both its doctrinal clarifications and articulated canons, sought, obviously under the rather demanding impetus of the first Christian Roman emperor, to weave the social fabric of the human relations in his charge more tightly together. The culturally conditioned framework of this process may seem alien and unsettling to us in many ways (for example the violence implied in contemporary and especially later artwork of Arius lying at the feet of the

emperor or bishops, physically assaulted by Nicholas of Myra, suffering with arch-heretics in Dante's *Inferno*, or even as a harbinger of traditions around the antichrist). Yet it's clear that the goal of the council had social, public, and earthly goals and effects, at least as consequential as its celestial ones. The discourse about such disagreement, even if expressed in forms markedly different from those of our day, testify to the role of the *sensus fidelium*, and thus to Francis's description of the longing of the human experience, and the ecclesial response to it. As the International Theological Commission (2025, n. 111) document puts it:

What is essential for our reflection is that the Church, assisted by the Holy Spirit and functioning synodically [*sic*, in the English translation], relying on the *sensus fidei fidelium* and on the particular authority of the apostles, constitutes the living and active mystery in which the doctrinal development regarding the distinction between the disciples of Christ from the Jewish people and those from the Gentiles in regard to the practice of the mosaic law was worked out. The arbitration of faith that concerned God's universal purpose, the entry of the nations into the mystery first revealed to Israel, took place here, in the exchange between *fides qua* and *fides quae*, within the dynamic mystery of the Church.

Obviously such a view argues for an ongoing conversation between a robust theology of the *sensus fidelium* and the tradition(s) of Catholic social thought and living, a reality only heightened with the recently elected pontiff's choice of the name Leo interpreted by many as a sure sign of continuity in this arena.

3 NICAIA AS A FORERUNNER TO REPARATION AS A PASTORAL AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

For residents of my home country of the United States,³ reparation(s), particularly if used in the plural, almost unequivocally draw to mind the ongoing debate about financial or social policies and initiatives aimed at rectifying historical violence done to the African-American and native American/first peoples/indigenous populations, support for which has grown among all racial segments of the nation since 2025. While certainly not completely foreign to that important reconciling work, pope Francis has spoken numerous times about the term as it relates to the 17th century devotions to the sacred heart, particularly as they were promulgated by Marguarite-Marie Alacoque and Claude de la Colombière. This spiritual sense of reparation is the focus of sections 181 through 204 of *Dilexit nos*.

Here Francis makes his case that sins, "especially" but not only those made at the direct expense of the neighbor, are inherently and intrinsically social realities, harming both the Church and society (DN 183). The work of interrogating the structures of sin that exist and not only *result* from individual people's sins but also can *cause* sinful behavior leads to recognizing this re-constructive dimension of reparation, a sense related to one a conference marking the 350th anniversary of the Paray-le-Monial apparitions chose as a theme, and to which Francis

³ I use this language intentionally, because I feel American is a more inclusive term. Unfortunately, we don't yet regularly use an adjectival form comparable to *estadunidense* in English.

“Where deceit and disguise have no place”

also spoke passionately: “*Réparer l’irréparable*”. There the pope explained: “reparation, to be Christian, to touch the heart of the offended person and not to be a simple act of commutative justice, presupposes two demanding attitudes: *recognizing oneself as guilty* and *asking for forgiveness*” (Francis, 2024). Reparation is then an act of the heart, of the ongoing process of metanoia, and of rebuilding inter-personal and social relationships in a commitment to “solidarity born of compunction” (DN 190)

None of this was foreign to the council fathers of Nicaea. In exploring the emergent trinitarian debates of the gathering, the perennial questions of Gethsemane undoubtedly arose. As the International Theological Commission (2025, n. 83) document puts it:

why does the Almighty Father seem to have first observed the suffering Son’s way of the cross from on high, and only acted after his death? Why did he not immediately answer the prayer in the Garden of Olives, presented in the sweat of fear: “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” (Mt 26,39b)?

Their answer makes clear why reparation and reconciliation as spiritual and pastoral practices lie at the very heart of the proffered solutions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

In fact, the equality of essence with the Father of the incarnate and crucified Son, professed in the Nicene symbol, invites human thought to conversion of itself and to conversion of the meaning of the term “omnipotence”. The triune God is not at first omnipotent and afterwards only loving; rather, his omnipotence is identical to the love manifested in Jesus Christ. Indeed, what Jesus lived, as attested in the New Testament, is – through the action of the Spirit – the revelation in history, on the level of the trinitarian economy, of the intra-trinitarian relation and reality immanent in God. God is truly God when his omnipotence of love imposes nothing but, rather, gives his covenant partner, human beings, the capacity to bind themselves to him in freedom. God is in harmony with his own being when he does not forcibly convert humanity distorted by sin, but reconciles it to himself through the events of Bethlehem and Golgotha. (International Theological Commission (2025, n. 83).

As the Nicene fathers recognized, we can fail to accept this gracious offer, thereby stunting or occluding the redemptive work of God in the world. *Dilexit nos* calls this a free refusal which prevents the heart of Christ from spreading “the waves of infinite tenderness” to all of creation (DN 198).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This brings us full circle to the opening pages of this text. If we are to live as our truest selves, as Christians concerned with all people of good will and the goodness of the natural gift of the created cosmos in which they are situated, we must remain engaged in a theological enterprise which does not posit doctrine over and against pastoral imperatives, or intellectual reflection over and against affective respect and amity for the neighbor and our common home.

This entails an ongoing process of both development and reception, a dialectical co-laboring with the Lord to make sure our own hearts and churches are *loci* “where deceit and disguise have no place” (DN 5). *Dilexit nos* has over the time spent researching and writing this piece moved from an authentic expression of the official magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church into pope Francis’s farewell discourse to a world he undoubtedly viewed as coarsening and cruel, much too frequently reveling in others’ pain and rejoicing in their exclusion, along with despoiling the only home we have ever had. And yet, Francis remains an enduring icon of hope in a troubled world, teaching us that the Tradition inherited from Nicaea still speaks to a human race beloved by God and traveling together to discern the “heart” of our faith and shared experience.

Without devolving into saccharine sentimentality, it is clear in retrospect that the words of the jesuit Saint Claude de la Columbière cited in *Dilexit nos*, take on profound new meaning given the passing of pope Francis. “I shall never lose my hope. I shall keep it to the last momento of my life [...]. I am sure, therefore, that I shall be eternally happy, since I firmly hope to be, and because it is from you, God, that I hope for it” (DN 126). It is the ongoing journey of a Church *no caminho*, molded by the Lord’s love for humanity and manifesting the collective heritage of Nicaea, to share the source of this hope with the world. ✨

REFERENCES

BRADY, Bernard V. From Catholic social thought to Catholic social living: a narrative of the Tradition. **Journal of Catholic Social Thought**, Villanova, v. 15, n. 2, p. 317-352, jun./set. 2018.

FRANCIS. Address to the participants in the international colloquium “*Réparer l’irréparable*”. **Holy See**, 4 maio 2024. Disponível em: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/may/documents/20240504-reparer-irreparable.html>. Acesso em: 22 fev. 2025.

FRANCIS. Encyclical letter *Dilexit nos*: on the human and divine love of the heart of Jesus Christ. **Holy See**, 24 out. 2024. Disponível em: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/20241024-enciclica-dilexit-nos.html>. Acesso em: 22 fev. 2025.

FRANCIS. Encyclical letter *Laudato si’*: on care for our common home. **Holy See**, 24 maio 2015. Disponível em: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. Acesso em: 23 fev. 2025.

GADAMER, Hans-Georg. **Truth and method**. Nova York: Crossroad, 1986.

INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH. Synodality and primacy during the first millennium: towards a common understanding in service to the unity of the Church. **Ecumenical Patriarchate Permanent Delegation to the World Council of Churches**, 21 set. 2016. Disponível em: <https://www.ecupatria.org/synodality-and-primacy-during-the-first-millennium-towards-a-common-understanding-in-service-to-the-unity-of-the-church/>. Acesso em: 21 fev. 2025.

“Where deceit and disguise have no place”

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION. Jesus Christ, Son of God, savior: 1700th anniversary of the ecumenical Council of Nicaea, 325-2025. **Holy See**, 3 abr. 2025. Disponível em: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20250403_1700-nicea_en.html. Acesso em: 5 abr. 2025.

JOHNSON, Elizabeth. **Ask the beasts**: darwin and the God of love. Nova York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015.

JOHNSON, Elizabeth. **Come have breakfast**: mediations on God and the Earth. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2024).

PIUS XII. Encyclical letter Haurietis aquas: on devotion to the sacred heart. **Holy See**, 15 maio 1956. Disponível em: https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_15051956_haurietis-aquas.html. Acesso em: 22 fev. 2025.

RAHNER, Karl. **Theological investigations**. Londres: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1961. v. 1.

Recebido em: 26/03/2025.

Aceito em: 29/06/2025.