

Finding Our Home in the Fire of Love: The Witness of Teilhard's Sacred Heart Spirituality

INTRODUCTION

In October of 2024, Pope Francis commemorated the 350th anniversary of Christ's revelation concerning his Sacred Heart to St. Marguerite-Marie Alacoque in his encyclical *Dilexit Nos* ("He Loved Us"). Francis acknowledges and responds to critics who dismiss the devotion as unsophisticated and even obscurant and retrieves Sacred Heart spirituality as a place where devotion and action converge, spilling out into the world to enact God's reign on earth as it is in heaven.¹ My goal in this paper is to hold up Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's spirituality as a witness to the unity between devotion and action affected in the lives of those who live from a home in the Sacred Heart.

I begin with a brief overview of the contemporary relevance and historical development of Sacred Heart spirituality. For contemporary American readers, it is hard to imagine how deeply the Sacred Heart saturated the French Catholic imagination of Teilhard's time, so I will focus more intensely on the history of the devotion in France to draw from the shadows the context in which Teilhard came to know, love, and live in the Sacred Heart. I will include touchpoints to the Teilhard de Chardin family's biography in that history so that the next section, an outline of the specifics of Sacred Heart devotion in Teilhard's life and writing, has some anchor points in that broader cultural context. Then I highlight three dimensions of the Sacred Heart devotional tradition (pointing beyond itself to the Eucharist, seeing the world through Christ's Heart, and being attentive to suffering) to which Teilhard, a mystic, writer, and scientist who did all of his work from within and toward the horizon of the Sacred Heart, is a witness. In the final section, I return to *Dilexit Nos* and Pope Francis' call to us, suggesting some ways that we can draw inspiration from Teilhard to "proclaim the love of God, to tell others that Christ is alive and worth knowing"² in our own time.

¹ At the time of his death in April of 2025, Francis was preparing *Dilexi Te* ("I Have Loved You"), an Apostolic Exhortation on the Church's care for the poor. The similar titles are not accidental; Francis saw deep continuity between the action that flows forth from devotion to the Sacred Heart and our response to the poor. Pope Leo XIV finished the Exhortation and published it on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi because he shares his predecessor's desire for us to see the connection between the love of Christ and His summons to care for the poor. Leo XIV, *Dilexi Te: Apostolic Exhortation to All Christians on Love for the Poor*, available at https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html, §3. Assigned by the Jesuits to minister in academic and scientific settings, Teilhard's opportunities for action that directly cared for the poor were limited, so *Dilexi Te* will not be engaged in this paper. I am indebted to my colleague Nick Rademacher for his collaboration during this project and his parallel development of Frances Xavier Cabrini as an exemplar of one whose Sacred Heart spirituality lives out deeply the call of both *Dilexit Nos* and *Dilexi Te*, and to Annie Huey for her excellent feedback on its structure and content.

² Francis, *Dilexit Nos: Encyclical Letter on the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ*, available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/20241024-enciclica-dilexit-nos.html>, §84, 19, 171, 216.