

2026
1st Place
Essay

On Openhandedness, or How I Learned To Open My Eyes

My life in the United States is isolated. Most of my time is spent between my suburb in Maryland and my preparatory school. When I go to Baltimore or DC with my family, we drive instead of taking public transit. Day-trips into the city are focused around a sporting event or a museum; we don't meander and explore. We tend to frequent developed areas instead of urban centers. We rarely go to malls; instead, we shop online. Coming face to face with poverty is honestly a deliberate effort. Once a year, we take a plane to visit mom's family in Peru. We go to grandma's house, give everyone kisses on the cheek, and, at some point, drive an hour out of Lima to a town where we get t-shirts and hand out food baskets and warm lunch to a neatly lined-up crowd of people that look like my family. Then, I fly back to a country where I thought inequality didn't exist, where food and work are plentiful for every person, and where, if a person is poor, it must be a character trait that landed them in that position.

I came face to face with poverty this December. In an effort to get community service hours for my first semester, I went to the Father McKenna Center to distribute hot breakfast. I wasn't sure I could do it. I'm telling you how I felt at the beginning, because the more I learned about the people in front of me, the more I realized that I was encountering Christ in every hungry face I served scrambled eggs, and in the eyes of every person who responded to my "good morning". I was afraid, at first, because it was different from my experience in Peru. Instead of being somewhere far away from my home and my school and my family, this place, and these people, were no more than twenty minutes away from the rest of my life. How did I not see them sooner? The scent of bodies that hadn't seen a shower in weeks overwhelmed my senses. I looked at my scrubbed nails and first thought about how lucky I am to have what I have, and to have it every day. Then, I wished that every single person milling around this room could have the same.

I stood there, being told how to greet people, and where to find nitrile gloves, and how to put on my food safety hairnet, when he came in. A tall man walked through the double doors, and the people around the entry moved out of his way. His voice boomed as he greeted people who shied away from him. As he got closer in line, I felt apprehension again. He seemed erratic, tried to start conversations with people who wouldn't meet his eyes. He casually used slurs and curses with a fluency I hadn't seen outside of movies. When he was about to come to me, I had half a mind to turn around and go to the stock room to get a new scooper, to get away. While I was stuck in my indecision, he arrived before me. He looked at me with tired eyes, and I knew there was only one thing to do.

I smiled, said good morning, and gave him a double helping of eggs. Immediately, his eyes widened and the corners of his mouth came up in a smile. He said, "Heeey man! No one's *ever* given me *these* many eggs before! I haven't eaten for twooooo days." He thanked me and went to sit at a table. It was empty when he sat there, and it stayed that way.

When my serving shift was over, I stood in the doorway of the kitchen for a moment, unsure of where to go. As I glanced around the room, I caught his gaze. He was still sitting alone. Something took over me: I walked over, asked how he enjoyed his breakfast, if I could get him anything.

I realized that he was long overdue for a haircut, probably needed a toothbrush and a stick of deodorant. This didn't feel like enough of a reason for him to be the only lonely person in that cafeteria. Everyone else had someone to talk and laugh with. I learned a lot about him while we spoke, and I realized much of what I assumed about him, and what I thought was true about poverty, was completely wrong. He told me about growing up in a rowhome in Southeast DC, about how his mother worked two jobs and still couldn't always keep the lights on. He told me about enlisting in the army after high school, just like my dad, because the recruiter promised education benefits and a steady paycheck he could send home from Iraq for his siblings. He told

me about scheduling V.A. appointments that were months out while the nightmares were every night. He told me his name: Marcus.

I realized I'd been serving breakfast to someone who could've been a classmate's cousin, my neighbor, a teacher. In Peru, poverty was something I held at a distance: I could observe, help with distributing food and clothes for an afternoon or two, and leave it all behind when I got on the plane home. Marcus shattered that comfortable distance. His poverty happened in my city, while I slept in my bed, studied for midterms, and played sports. My town's structure keeps the poor alienated: without sidewalks, covered bus stops, or warm public buildings, the poor are constantly in motion. They have to walk for miles to get cheap food, with few crosswalks and sidewalks in between to keep them safe. The poverty in my city has people living in high-rises while there's a woman begging outside. The poverty in my city makes it easier to buy lethal drugs than to seek rehabilitation.

While reading *Dilexi Te*, I realized that Marcus experienced every kind of poverty that Pope Leo XIV described.¹ Marcus was a social outcast even amongst people who shared his status. His dignity, both as a person and as a veteran, was overshadowed by his rough language and unwashed clothes. Who did anything when the system abandoned Marcus, after he gave it years of his life? He was rendered voiceless, without a space to call his own, no freedom to sit or walk without being asked to move along by police. In a very different sense of the word "poverty", I was poor too: in my ignorance of the need in my country, and in my fragile fear of the unknown.

I realize that Christ's exhortation to help the poor is motivated by direct action. He touched lepers², ate with tax collectors and sinners³. Even in the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah writes about releasing injustice, freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry and sheltering

¹ Pope Leo XIV, *Dilexi Te*: Apostolic Exhortation on Love for the Poor (October 4, 2025), §9.

² Matthew 8:2-4 (New Revised Standard Version).

³ Luke 5:29-32 (NRSV)

wanderers⁴, and in the laws for the Hebrews expressed in Deuteronomy, God commands the Israelites to be open-handed to the poor and needy amongst them, because “there will always be poor people in the land.”⁵

In the Old Testament, God tells his followers and prophets that poverty will always be there, even amongst his chosen people, and that it’s up to human will to help fellow men. When I sit at a table with men like Marcus, when I see families without protection from the elements asking for food, when I see the sick and disabled asking for solace, I wonder how God allows these conditions to continue. Then, I remember what Marcus experienced, and realize that people created the circumstances that keep others in poverty, make them work without end or support in sight, and discard them when they have nothing more to give.

The connection to Christ's care became clearer: Jesus didn't help people from a position of superiority. He came to them, he was vulnerable and strong, present to the pain of the meek. Jesus teaches that when we feed the hungry and care for those in need, we encounter him: Helping those in need is a demonstration of love and faith.⁶ Marcus, and everyone like him, is not just part of "the homeless". He is a man worth caring for, not just for his circumstances, but for his humanity.

I don't want to be the only one making that twenty-minute drive. I've started to proselytize good will by inviting my classmates to come with me on Saturday mornings, to see what I've seen and hear what I've heard. I'm still learning. I still feel uncomfortable sometimes. Now, my friends are learning from their discomfort too. Every time we serve breakfast, every time someone new joins in, I remember this is where Christ lives: in hungry faces and yearning eyes. If I'm to follow Christ, I have to show up and do the work. One scoopful of eggs and a single Saturday morning at a time.

⁴ Isaiah 58:6-8 (NRSV)

⁵ Deuteronomy 15:11 (NRSV)

⁶ Matthew 25:35-40 (NRSV)

Works Cited

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2026
2nd Place
Essay

The John Carroll Society

2026 Margaret Mary Missar High School Essay Competition

“... the poor have learned many things that they keep hidden in their hearts...”

- Pope Leo XIV, Section 102

My biological mom was a survivor. She was loved by her kids, but no one else showed her love in her life. She tried so hard to keep a roof over our heads. Some nights, the roof was the motel by the highway. Other nights, an unknown person's house. She met a man that she prayed had loved her. He let us into his home and soon gave me whoopings. That pain was nothing compared to the pain felt when he beat my brother to death. My mom was working two jobs, and I was the only one who was there when it happened. That night was hell on earth, and the pain still lives in my heart, hidden, like Pope Leo XIV said.

The police came, and I remember the officer who comforted me and brought me donuts. Pope Leo XIV writes in *Dilexi Te*, “No sign of affection, even the smallest, will ever be forgotten, especially if it is shown to those who are suffering, lonely, or in need, as was the Lord at that time.” I will never forget that police officer and I learned from his kindness when I took care of my friend Sam. He was using harsh language about his life and talked about running away from his parents. I stopped everything that I was doing and walked around the park with him for hours. Sam was getting picked on in school, his parents were upset at him, and he felt like he was completely alone because girls didn't like him. I told Sam that he has a big heart but cannot run away because it would be impossible for me to see him if he did that. I also said if he ever gets dark thoughts that he should not make any decisions and come to talk to me immediately.

I grew up in a neighborhood where there was a lot of gang violence, and my town made the news because of our violent riots. It was an early indication in my life that the black community is marginalized, neglected, and pitted against each other for survival. Pope Leo XIV writes in *Dilexi Te*, "...there are many forms of poverty: the poverty of those who lack material means of subsistence, the poverty of those who are socially marginalized and lack the means to give voice to their dignity and abilities, moral and spiritual poverty, cultural poverty, the poverty of those who find themselves in a condition of personal or social weakness or fragility, the poverty of those who have no rights, no space, no freedom." I've lived through these forms of poverty; every single one. When I lived with my biological mom, we had no material means of subsistence. I remember being hungry a lot and so happy when there was food. Then, when my brother died, I bounced between many foster homes for the next five years, feeling forgotten, without love or dignity. This is what causes poverty to stay in communities for decades. So, when I see poverty, I always ask my adopted dad to give a dollar to the homeless. He told me he was worried they would just spend it on drugs, but I told him to give anyway because we can't stop hoping. I searched for the word "hope" in *Dilexi Te*, and it appears five times, so we must have hope in our hearts. I do the same thing when I take the metro to school and back home. If I have an extra dollar left over from lunch, I give to the poor on my way home.

My adopted parents met me when I was 11. I didn't think I would ever be adopted. My social worker told me that older kids are harder to adopt, but to still have hope. My adopted parents replaced all my therapy sessions and my schizophrenic and bipolar drugs with sports. So, instead of taking 10 pills a day, I sweated every single day. They also put me in Catholic school after my reading and writing improved. In *Dilexi Te*, Pope Leo XIV writes that, "Christian education does not only form professionals, but also people open to goodness, beauty, and truth.

Catholic schools, therefore, when they are faithful to their name, are places of inclusion, integral formation and human development. By combining faith and culture, they sow the seeds of the future, honor the image of God and build a better society.” My adopted parents knew this and wanted me to be schooled in the teachings of faith and inclusion. They are Hispanic but make an extra effort to put me in a Catholic school with over 50% African American students. My school is pivotal to creating a better society because they accept and teach boys like me, who were once poor. In return, I give back to the school by playing goalie on their junior varsity lacrosse team, where I get hit with very hard lacrosse balls several times a practice, and I also throw shotput for their track and field team. Lastly, I am doing more community service hours required with Catholic Charities, and DC Central Kitchen. I represent my school there when I prepare food for those who are hungry.

Society is really complicated. I just joined the debate team this year, and the topics are everywhere like the U.S. military operation in Venezuela, whether schools should say the pledge of allegiance, and the minimum wage amount for workers. I am learning more about how arguments are tied to political parties, and religion. Pope Leo XIV writes in *Dilexi Te*, “At times, Christian movements or groups have arisen which show little or no interest in the common good of society and, in particular, the protection and advancement of its most vulnerable and disadvantaged members. Yet we must never forget that religion, especially the Christian religion, cannot be limited to the private sphere, as if believers had no business making their voice heard with regard to problems affecting civil society and issues of concern to its members.” I am still new to politics and many topics, but I believe we should try to act in the way that Jesus did. He prayed, and he loved the poor. The bible teaches us to love one another. If we can keep that in our brains while we make decisions and talk to each other, I believe we can find the right answer.

It seems like that is why Pope Leo XIV wrote the Dilexi Te. It is a reminder to act inspired, and to not forget the poor. I liked the way he titled his Chapter Three: A Church For The Poor. This is not a church for the greedy. It is a church for the broken and those people with hidden pains and lessons in their hearts.

I will continue to live out the message of Dilexi Te in my life by not being afraid of the poor. I used to be poor, and I know the place they are living in. My story had a lot of sadness in it, and I feel the sadness in my fingertips as I type this. However, a journey can change from sadness to hope though; mine did. Pope Leo XIV knows this is possible with hope, and I will work to bring the same story to others.

This essay is submitted by the deadline. The essay is my original work, and it took me about nine hours to write with some breaks. I did not use AI. The essay is double-spaced, and about 1200 words. In the instructions, it says to not include any personal information, so I have not included my name or school.

2026
3rd Place
Essay

Dilexi Te Reflection Essay

“Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do (John 14:12). Jesus said these words to His disciples. He promised that all of His disciples would do the same works he did, and even “greater works.” He said that although He would return to the Father, His mission on Earth remains. His gospel of love would live on in His Church for generations to come, with His followers emboldened by the Holy Spirit. Jesus called us to follow in His footsteps in John’s gospel, and Pope Leo XIV invites us to do the same in his apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te*. The meaning of “Dilexi Te” is “I have loved you,” a phrase that contains the greatest truth of all: God’s love for the world. That love is present throughout the Old Testament, in the ministry of Jesus, and mission of His Church. As people of faith, we are expected to continue Jesus’s ministry, serving the poor, the needy, the lonely, and the vulnerable. Pope Leo XIV emphasizes this mission, stating how it is not merely a suggestion, but a responsibility that each and every one of us should uphold with intention and act upon without hesitation.

I recently had an experience with serving someone in need. My school’s choir and string ensemble made a trip in December to the Little Sisters of the Poor. There, we performed Christmas music for the residents and the Sisters. They were the sweetest, most welcoming audience. One resident, an elderly woman, invited me to sit beside her during the string ensemble’s performance. We exchanged greetings and introduced ourselves, switching to speaking in Spanish halfway through. (She’d asked if I spoke Spanish after hearing my name, to which I replied a very enthusiastic “yes!”) I quickly learned that she was Colombian, had a taste for art, and a sweet tooth—all of which we found we had in common. We spoke of Monet and how she’d been to an exhibit earlier in the year. She complimented my rings, saying how she loved to wear jewelry in her youth. In the middle of the string performance, she asked with a shy curiosity if I happened to have anything sweet with me. I quickly took some gummies I’d brought with me and shared them with her as we enjoyed the music. She spoke with such kindness that I found myself wanting to stay longer with her. After my choir’s performance, we had to leave. We exchanged hugs and she thanked my choir director, to whom she gave another hug and requested the choir come back in the spring. She walked with us to the elevator and waved a final goodbye, wishing me a safe journey and a soon

return. This experience left me with a bittersweet feeling. On one hand, I was happy to have made a new friend, especially one who I was able to relate to so easily. On the other, I felt sad since she seemed to have been wanting more company, as she seemed so excited to have someone to connect with and then saddened at the abrupt nature of which the conversation ended.

This experience has then led me to view the idea of poverty as something deeper than simply an issue of material wealth. We seem so focused as a society to fulfill physical needs of others, such as shelter, food, and water, which are all very necessary for one to live, yet we seem to neglect the human nature behind those facing poverty. One can make a simple donation, an act of basic philanthropy, a tax-deductible contribution just to feel as if we are doing “enough.” The issue with this is that there is no human interaction, no acknowledgment of the soul or human dignity of the person on the receiving end. One conversation can be worth more than a check; one hug can give more warmth than a shelter for a night; one moment in which we acknowledge the person behind the poverty is worth more than any quick, online donation.

Catholics aren’t expected to be comfortable, observing the poor and simply wishing their struggles away, but rather we are entrusted to continue the work of Christ, sitting down with the poor at a table, breaking bread alongside them and forming relationships. In doing so, we fulfill many needs that occur in various forms of poverty. Poverty is a situation in which the inherent human dignity of an individual is neglected. Those who are poor cannot provide for themselves or their families; those who are poor feel silenced in a world of noise; those who are poor feel isolated and lonely. Jesus didn’t go around tossing money at beggars or simply paying the blind and lame, in hopes their ailments would soon pass. Instead, He sat with them, comforted them and placed His hands upon them, healing them body and soul. We may not be able to help the blind regain their sight or the deaf their hearing, but we cannot underestimate the power of a genuine presence.

Dilexi Te means “for I have loved you.” This same love is the reason we were created. This same love is why Jesus was not only incarnate, but born in a manger as a refugee. God so loved the world, filled with His beautiful and broken children, that He came to live among us in the most humble of circumstances. Just as He ate with the beggars, lepers, tax collectors and Gentiles, young Catholics today can engage with those who feel isolated in

our modern day society. Visiting nursing homes, hospitals, or soup kitchens are just a few of the many ways we can care for the needy amongst us in more meaningful ways. Pope Leo XIV's apostolic exhortation is not merely an important Church document, but a direct mandate to Catholics, asking us to intentionally and purposefully display Christ's love in our daily lives. By actively seeking out and being a part of opportunities to sit with, listen to, and serve others, we mirror the love of Christ, affirming the dignity of every person we meet and bringing his presence into the world in ways both small and profound.