



What is the Eye of the Heart?

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How is the concept of ‘heart’ used by Pope Francis in ‘Dilexit Nos’? ⁸ And how can we understand this notion from a somewhat contemplative perspective?

Whenever the word ‘heart’ appears in spiritual writings, we usually understand that it does not simply mean the seat of the emotions. It points rather to the deepest part of us – the inner place where together abide love, faith, our sense of right and wrong, and the divine presence within us. To return to the heart, in this sense, is to rediscover the centre from which our words, actions, and relationships draw their meaning. If we are in touch with ourselves, that is.

Throughout *Dilexit Nos*, this "heart" remains a living thread. It is not the heart of fleeting emotion, but the heart that listens and responds – the place where truth is tasted rather than grasped, where compassion becomes understanding, and where encounter with God flows outward as care for others. In one passage, the Pope speaks of putting all our actions under "the political rule of the heart," (see *Box, Article 13*) a striking reminder that love and discernment are not merely private qualities but can become forces capable of guiding the moral and social life of communities.

Why did the Pope use the word "political" here? Perhaps because we have come to think of politics as the realm of pragmatic calcu-

(*) This article explores themes from Pope Francis's final encyclical *Dilexit Nos* (Latin: "He loved us". 24 October 2024), which meditates on the human and divine love of the Heart of Jesus Christ. Pope Leo XIV's first apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te* (Latin: "I have loved you", 4 October 2025) builds explicitly upon *Dilexit Nos*, showing how love of the Sacred Heart finds concrete expression in love for the poor. The phrase "the political rule of the heart" appears in *Dilexit Nos* – See *Box*

Three Paragraphs from *Dilexit Nos (He Loved Us)*, Encyclical of Pope Francis, Chapter 1 Returning to the Heart

11. 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.

12. It must be said, then, that we have a heart, a heart that coexists with other hearts that help to make it a “Thou”. Since we cannot develop this theme at length, we will take a character from one of Dostoevsky’s novels, Nikolai Stavrogin. Romano Guardini argues that Stavrogin is the very embodiment of evil, because his chief trait is his heartlessness: “Stavrogin has no heart, hence his mind is cold and empty and his body sunken in bestial sloth and sensuality. He has no heart, hence he can draw close to no one and no one can ever truly draw close to him. For only the heart creates intimacy, true closeness between two persons. Only the heart is able to welcome and offer hospitality. Intimacy is the proper activity and the domain of the heart. Stavrogin is always infinitely distant, even from himself, because a man can enter into himself only with the heart, not with the mind. It is not in a man’s power to enter into his own interiority with the mind. Hence, if the heart is not alive, man remains a stranger to himself”.

13. All our actions need to be put under the “**political rule**” of the **heart**. (*emphasis added*) In this way, our aggressiveness and obsessive desires will find rest in the greater good that the heart proposes and in the power of the heart to resist evil. The mind and the will are put at the service of the greater good by sensing and savouring truths, rather than seeking to master them as the sciences tend to do. The will desires the greater good that the heart recognizes, while the imagination and emotions are themselves guided by the beating of the heart.



lation, ideological conflict, and the pursuit of power and profit – while consigning spirituality to a separate sphere, remote from the demands of the world. To place our actions under the political rule of the heart is to refuse that division. It is to ask whether a contemplatively awakened heart might guide not only prayer, but action;

not only personal virtue, but the shaping of a more just and merciful common life. Can the heart – purified of ego's addictions, trained in stillness and love – become the source of an enlightened politics, a contemplatively motivated engagement with the world? This is the horizon the Pope quietly opens.

While the language of *Dilexit Nos* often turns to justice, poverty, and human dignity, its foundation is unmistakably interior. The call to serve the poor is not simply a social policy but the overflow of a heart renewed in divine love. This continuity of meaning runs through the document: the heart as the spiritual and relational centre, the organ of intimacy and moral vision, the well-spring of mercy and action.

This article gathers and explores that vision – tracing how the papal teaching on the heart resonates with the Christian contemplative tradition and with the Sufi and mainstream Islamic understanding of the *qalb*. Both perspectives see the heart as the meeting place of the human and the divine, a space that must be purified, tended, and kept awake if it is to reflect the light of truth. What follows is an attempt to draw these insights together – to listen again to what the Pope, the mystics, and Muslim contemplatives are saying about the one interior place where love learns to see.





The Heart in *Dilexit Nos*: Interiority and Relationship

In the opening chapter, "Returning to the Heart," Pope Francis warns that if we devalue the heart, we lose the messages that the mind alone cannot communicate. The heart, he suggests, is the place of poetry, memory, and intimacy – the ground of our real personal history. It is not merely a metaphor for emotion but the deep-

est seat of personhood, where love, freedom, and moral perception are united.

The Pope's reference to Dostoevsky's Stavrogin captures the existential cost of heartlessness: a life of intellect without intimacy, of will without tenderness. "Only the heart," he writes, "creates intimacy, true closeness between two persons." This is the moral and spiritual centre of human life. Without it, one remains "a stranger to himself."



Therefore, the Pope's appeal to place all human action "under the political rule of the heart" is not a sentimental flourish but a call to reintegrate the inner life and the public sphere. The heart, in his teaching, is both the contemplative seat of discernment and the engine of ethical transformation.

The Heart as the Organ of Divine Encounter

In the Christian mystical tradition, the heart has long been recognised as the meeting-place of God and the human person. The Desert Fathers spoke of guarding the heart; the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* urged the lifting of the heart "with a meek stirring of love" toward God. St John of the Cross described the pure heart as the "temple of love, where the Beloved rests and reveals Himself."

This inner work of purification – what the Eastern Fathers called *nepsis* or watchfulness – polishes the heart until it reflects the divine light. Evagrius Ponticus wrote that "a pure heart sees the depths of creation"; and Isaac of Nineveh taught that when one enters "the treasury within," one glimpses heaven itself.

The Pope's teaching harmonises with this ancient wisdom. The mind and will, he writes, must serve the "greater good that the heart proposes," recognising that truth is to be sensed and savoured rather than mastered. This is the contemplative knowing that joins knowledge and love.





Corresponding Voices in the Qur'an and *Hadith*

In the Qur'an, the heart (*qalb*) holds a similar dignity. It is the faculty of insight and faith, the mirror of the divine presence within. The heart that turns away becomes blind, though the eyes remain open:

"Truly it is not the eyes that grow blind, but the hearts within the breasts that grow blind." (Qur'an 22:46)

The sound heart (*qalb salīm*), free from arrogance and deceit, is the sole measure of worth before God:

"On the Day when neither wealth nor sons will avail, except he who comes to God with a sound heart." (Qur'an 26:88–89)

Prophetic tradition deepens this view. The Prophet Muhammad said, "There is a morsel of flesh in the body; if it is sound, the whole body is sound, and if it is corrupt, the whole body is corrupt. Truly, it is the heart." (Hadith) And again, "Allah does not look at your forms or your wealth, but He looks at your hearts and your deeds."

The classical theologian and mystic al-Ghazālī expanded this teaching with luminous clarity: "The heart is like a mirror; lust and anger are like smoke that clouds it, and heedlessness is rust upon it. When the rust is removed through remembrance and reflection, the realities of things are unveiled."

Parallels Between the Two Traditions

Christian Insight (Dilexit Nos) "If we devalue the heart, we lose the messages the mind alone cannot communicate."

Islamic Parallel "It is not the eyes that grow blind, but the hearts within the breasts." (Q 22:46)

Christian Insight (Dilexit Nos) "At the end of our lives, that alone will matter."

Islamic Parallel "Except he who comes to God with a sound heart." (Q 26:88–89)

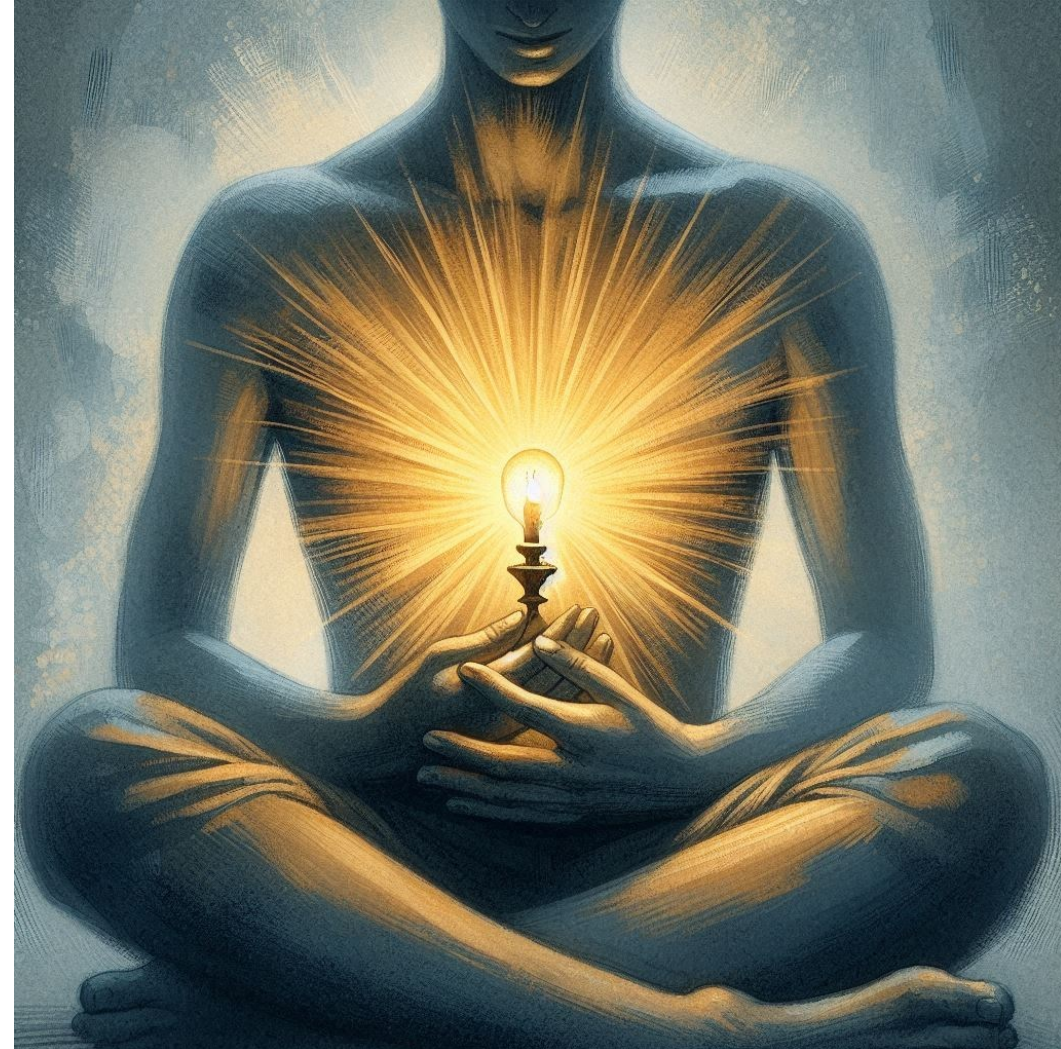
Both traditions describe a moral and mystical centre that joins inner awareness with compassionate action. Each speaks of purification, remembrance, and the transformation of perception. The *qalb* of Islam and the *kardia* of Christianity name the same depth-dimension of being: the interior organ by which love perceives truth.

There is a striking parallel in the Gospels to the *Hadith* about the heart as "a morsel of flesh" that determines the soundness of the whole body. In Matthew 6:22–23, Jesus teaches:

"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is diseased, your whole body will be full of darkness."

Here, the eye symbolises perception, orientation, and intention – much as the heart does in other sayings. To have a "sound" eye means to see with simplicity and integrity; to have a "diseased" eye is to be clouded by greed, envy, or duplicity. The imagery thus perfectly mirrors the *Hadith*: both describe a central inner faculty whose health determines the moral and spiritual health of the whole person.

The "eye" looks outward, the "heart" inward – yet both refer to the same integrating centre of consciousness and intention. In a contemplative reading, the two images converge. The heart is the inner eye through which divine light is received. When Jesus says, "If your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light," he speaks



of a clear interior vision – the ability to see reality through love rather than through self-interest.

Mystical writers often interpret this passage as referring to the purified heart or the single eye of simplicity. St Symeon the New Theologian wrote, "When the eye of the soul is illumined, the whole body is illumined by the divine fire." Meister Eckhart expressed a profound related insight: "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me."

The Eye of the Heart: A Unifying Vision

The Sufi notion of '*ayn al-qalb*' (the eye of the heart – in Maltese this would be *għajn il-qalb*) brings together these two great scriptural images – the "heart" as the seat of moral and spiritual integrity, and the "eye" as the organ of light and perception – and interprets them as one unified organ of knowing and loving.

While the term appears in several Sufi writers, *Ibn 'Arabī* (1165–1240) gives it its fullest articulation. For him, the eye of the heart is that dimension of consciousness capable of perceiving divine realities beyond the reach of discursive reason. It is not mere imagination, nor emotion, but a purified faculty of direct perception – what he sometimes calls *basīra*, inner sight.

In the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, *Ibn 'Arabī* writes:

"The heart has two eyes: one of reason and one of imagination. When both are sound and balanced, the heart sees the truth of things as they are."

This dual vision corresponds closely to the Christian idea that intellect and affection must be harmonised within the heart for true discernment. The "eye of the heart" in *Ibn 'Arabī's* thought unites reason's clarity and love's intimacy; it is the meeting-place of knowledge and union.

In effect, he turns the Gospel's "eye" and the *Hadith's* "heart" into one symbol of contemplative wholeness. The "eye" speaks of light and perception; the "heart" speaks of love and integration. Joined together, they describe a faculty that knows through love and sees through purity.

This synthesis also explains why so many Sufis describe spiritual realisation as a transformation of vision: not an escape from the world, but a seeing-through of the world to its divine ground. *Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī*, echoing both Jesus and *Ibn 'Arabī*, writes:

"The work of the eyes is done; now go and see with the eye of the heart. That eye looks not outward, but inward – it beholds the Beloved everywhere."

For Christian mystics, this insight finds an almost perfect resonance. St Augustine prayed, "You were within me, and I was outside myself; there I sought you." The eye of the heart restores that inward vision through which the divine light, already present within, becomes visible. St Paul speaks of "the eyes of your heart being enlightened" (Ephesians 1:18), a phrase that could almost serve as a bridge between the two traditions.

In both paths, the human being becomes luminous when this inner eye awakens. The heart that sees is no longer divided; it participates in the seeing of God.



The mirror of the heart

Returning to the Heart

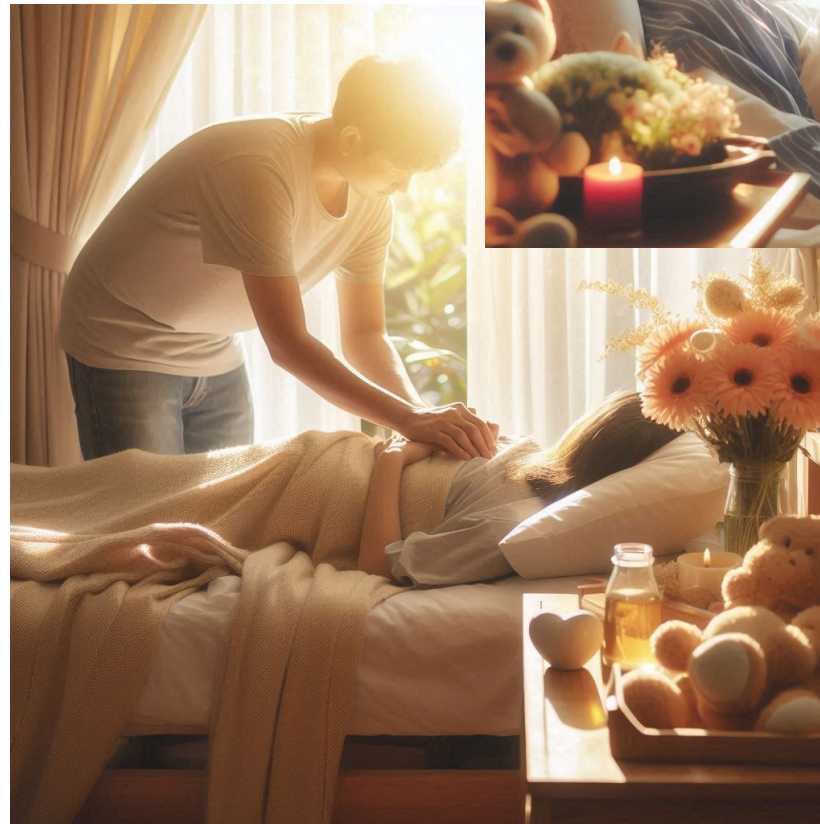
To return to the heart is to awaken to this depth. It is to enter the quiet chamber where divine presence is felt, and from which justice, mercy, and wisdom must flow. When the Pope calls the Church to "the political rule of the heart," he is not moving away from contemplation but grounding action in its rightful source.

The Christian and Muslim streams, flowing side by side, affirm a shared anthropology of compassion. The heart is where faith becomes love, where knowing becomes tasting, and where the life of God finds its human echo.

"Verily, in the remembrance of God do hearts find rest." (Qur'an 13:28)

And St Augustine, long before, said the same in his own tongue: "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You."

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Endnotes *(in order of citation)*

Pope Francis, *Dilexit Nos: Encyclical Letter on the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 24 October 2024), §13. Available at: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/20241024-enciclica-dilexit-nos.html>

Nikolai Vsevolodovich Stavrogin. (See Box with extract from *Dilexit Nos*.) He was a central figure in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *Demons* (*Besy*, 1872), is depicted as a charismatic aristocrat marked by moral ambiguity, detachment, and profound internal conflict. Stavrogin's struggle with nihilism and the consequences of conscience reflects Dostoevsky's critique of a life devoid of spiritual or ethical grounding.

John of the Cross (1542–1591), Spanish Carmelite friar and poet, one of the major figures of Christian mysticism and a Doctor of the Church; *Spiritual Canticle* (Commentary, Stanza 1), in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans. K. Kavanaugh & O. Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991).

Evagrius Ponticus (345–399), monk and theologian of the Egyptian desert, among the earliest systematisers of Christian contemplative psychology; *Chapters on Prayer*, §61, in *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, ed. G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard & K. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

Isaac of Nineveh (7th century), Syriac bishop and hermit renowned for his teachings on divine mercy and interior stillness; *Homilies II.38*, trans. S. Brock, *The Second Part: Chapters IV–XLI* (Louvain: Peeters, 1995), *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 554.

The Qur'an, 22:46, trans. A. J. Arberry (1905–1969), English Orientalist and translator celebrated for rendering the Qur'an into literary English; *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

The Qur'an, 26:88–89, same edition as above.

Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 52; *Sahih Muslim*, 1599 — canonical Sunni collections of *Hadith* compiled respectively by Imam al-Bukhari (810–870) and Imam Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (815–875), among the most authoritative sources of Prophetic tradition.

Sahih Muslim, 2564, *ibid*.

Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), Persian theologian, jurist, and mystic, widely considered the pre-eminent renewer of Islamic spirituality; *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Book XXI, *Kitab Sharh 'Aja'ib al-Qalb* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 2005).

The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (National Council of Churches, 1989), Matthew 6:22–23.

Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022), Byzantine monk and hymn-writer celebrated for his experiential theology of divine light; *Hymns of Divine Love*, trans. G. Maloney (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1976).

Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1328), German Dominican preacher, philosopher, and mystic whose sermons shaped later Christian contemplative thought; *German Sermons*, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. E. Colledge & B. McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).

Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240), Andalusian mystic and philosopher known in Islam as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (“the Greatest Master”), whose vast writings articulate a unitive vision of divine reality; *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Revelations)*, cited in W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273), Persian poet, jurist, and Sufi teacher whose *Masnawi-ye Ma'navi* became one of the world's most loved mystical poems; *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'd-Dīn Rūmī*, Book III, v. 1801, ed. and trans. R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac & Co., 1926).

Augustine of Hippo (354–430), North African bishop and foundational theologian of Western Christianity; *Confessions*, I.1, trans. H. Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

The Holy Bible, NIV, Ephesians 1:18. “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people”.

The Qur'an, 13:28.

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