Social Communication Ethics volume 2 • issue 3 • 2026 • pages 81–90 REVIEW

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AI for humanity, not humanity for AI: Pope Leo XIV's concern for the human person and the environment in the age of Artificial Intelligence

https://doi.org/10.15633/sce.02305

Article history • Received: 28 Sep 2026 • Accepted: 28 Sep 2026 • Published: 12 Oct 2026
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The 135th anniversary of the promulgation of Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical „Rerum novarum"

At the end of the nineteenth century, Pope Leo XIII (1810–1903) had to confront the challenges associated with the Industrial Revolution, the problems arising from the condition of workers, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, and the progressive disintegration of social bonds. Leo XIII firmly advocated a Christian social policy, rejecting Marxist socialism while also challenging short-sighted capitalism. He called society to cooperation. The encyclical Rerum novarum, promulgated on 15 May 1891, critically addressed the unrestrained pursuit of profit at the expense of others, as well as all manifestations of economic imperialism.

Rapacious usury, which, although more than once condemned by the Church, is nevertheless, under a different guise, but with the like injustice, still practiced by covetous and grasping men. To this must be added that the hiring of labor and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery (no. 2),

Leo XIII wrote:

> He warned against attempts to form a new human being without reference to moral renewal. He also reaffirmed the principle of the universal destination of goods without denying the right to private property (no. 4 ff.).

Just as Pope Leo XIII stood on the side of human beings 135 years ago, Pope Leo XIV, faced with the new challenges of the "algorithmic revolution" and the digital economy, likewise defends the human person by recalling the principles of Catholic social teaching. The Holy Father responds to the threat associated with the so-called "technocratic paradigm" and to other problems of the contemporary world.

"Magnifica humanitas"

The social encyclical Magnifica humanitas of Pope Leo XIV, "On Care for the Human Person in the Age of Artificial Intelligence," was promulgated on 15

May 2026, in the second year of his pontificate. The title Magnifica humanitas may be rendered as "magnificent humanity." It is not accidental. The very first sentence of the encyclical points to "humanity created by God" and to the need to protect it in an age of technological transformation. It directs attention toward admiration for the human person, especially against the background of contemporary fascination with technical and technological innovation. The title therefore constitutes a kind of synthesis of the document, which is centred on the value of the dignity of the human person. It would be mistaken, or at least reductive, to claim that the document concerns merely the individual use of artificial intelligence or serves as a kind of instruction manual. The human person is the subject and criterion of AI development, not the reverse. This is confirmed by the analyses and conclusions drawn from the social teaching of the Church's Magisterium. Human activity is concerned with the realization of the good within the multidimensional contexts of justice, fraternity, work, family, education, authority, governance, the economy, social relations, and other spheres.

In the document, Leo XIV refers directly to the teaching of eight popes. Beginning with Leo XIII, whom he cites six times, and continuing with Pius XI (twice), Pius XII (once), John XXIII (once), Paul VI (five times), John Paul II (nineteen times), Benedict XVI (three times), and Francis (seventeen times), he demonstrates the close relationship between Catholic social teaching and its essential role in diagnosing contemporary reality.

The Pope does not focus exclusively on documents concerning technology. Rather, he demonstrates its present significance by drawing on teaching concerning inalienable dignity, human rights, work, authority, ecology, technology, and economics. These are important issues, particularly when artificial intelligence is considered as a historical phenomenon subject to evaluation in the light of Catholic social teaching.

In addition to papal documents, Magnifica humanitas refers to homilies, speeches, messages, audiences, statements by laypeople, and institutional documents. Beyond the popes themselves, the figures cited include the philosopher of religion Romano Guardini (1885–1968); the Austrian philosopher, psychiatrist, and psychotherapist Viktor Frankl (1905–1997); the philosopher and public intellectual Hannah Arendt (1906–1975); the mayor of Florence, politician, and professor Giorgio La Pira (1904–1977); the French cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629); and the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, including St Augustine (354–430) and St Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). Particularly

noteworthy is the document's reference to the British writer and philologist John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892–1973), professor of English language and literature and specialist in Germanic languages and literatures, and author of The Lord of the Rings. More precisely, the reference is to The Return of the King, the third part of the work. As an aside, it may be noted that in 1978 J. R. R. Tolkien received the Locus Award for Best Fantasy Novel for The Silmarillion.

Among the institutional sources, particular attention should be paid to the International Theological Commission document Quo vadis, humanitas (approved by Leo XIV on 9 February 2026 and published on 4 March 2026); the Note Antiqua et nova of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education (28 January 2025); and the document of the Second Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (26 October 2024), cited in connection with the experience of synodality. The text also refers to speeches delivered at the United Nations and to the Charter of the United Nations.

Magnifica humanitas has a coherent and logical structure. The philosophical, ethical, and Catholic social teaching materials employed contribute to a substantive argument. The document consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion: Introduction; I. Dynamic Thought Faithful to the Gospel; II. Foundations and Principles of the Church's Social Teaching; III. Technology and Dominion: The Greatness of the Human Person in the Face of the Promises of Artificial Intelligence; IV. Safeguarding Humanity amid Transformation: Truth, Work, Freedom; V. A Culture of Power and a Civilization of Love; Conclusion.

"Building on the foundation of the good": How to avoid chaos in the age of AI

The central issue concerns the human person in relation to the use of AI as one of the res novae, the "new things" of our time. Civilizational transformation confronts the Church with the need to interpret new phenomena, apply criteria for their evaluation, and explain the relationship between the human person, technology, and the power associated with it. Another overriding concern is transparency regarding technology's impact on truth, freedom, responsibility, changes in the labour sector, and models of interpersonal

relations shaped by the use of new technologies. The starting point of the argument is anchored in two biblical images: the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9) and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 2–6). Their use is intended to show that, by observing God's law, human beings can construct the authentic common good. It also answers the question of to whom technological development should be subordinated. A code governing the use of AI should be constructed with norms that exclude evil. Authentic humanism requires a subject-centred and personalist approach in which the human person remains the subject and criterion of technological development, particularly in the governance and design of various services (human-centred design, a term drawn from the language of technology design). "When a city is built on pride and on the claim to self-sufficiency, communication breaks down, languages become confused, and people cease to understand one another. The result is not unity but dispersion" (no. 7).

The encyclical presents AI as an issue embedded in the broader realities of industrialization, markets and labour, globalization, wars, and the ecological crisis. It therefore becomes necessary to recall fundamental questions concerning the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity, and justice. Only by taking this axiological framework into account can AI be properly evaluated. The problem is not limited to users' use of artificial intelligence or to the possibilities of acting through it; it also concerns control, decision-making, and the capacity to exercise real influence over the lives of others. Therefore, as we experience how "rapidly and profoundly digitalization, artificial intelligence (AI), and robotics are transforming our world" (no. 4), decision-making processes must be approached responsibly. What is required is a holistic view of AI as an element that shapes real social relations and exerts a tangible influence on structures of power. Artificial intelligence has become permanently embedded in the environment that now shapes personal relationships, the economy, politics, institutions, and other spheres.

It is impossible to overlook the significance and influence of AI on human beings and their environment. "Every technology educates the person who uses it" (no. 140). Questions must therefore be asked about individual autonomy and agency, mechanisms of control, the dissemination of information, family relationships, and the formation of friendships. In this respect, the encyclical examines three analytical categories: truth, freedom, and work.

The concluding synthesis is an appeal to the norm of love as the central point of reference for individual conduct.

"Develop technology without allowing the heart to regress": On the threats outlined in the Encyclical „Magnifica humanitas"

The principal challenges and threats identified by Leo XIV include the problem of dehumanization within a technocratic environment (nos. 1, 10, 15, 169), that is, the reduction of the human being to numbers, results, data, commodities, or functions (no. 180), as well as the treatment of the person as a project to be optimized (nos. 112–114). No less significant are the technocratic paradigm (nos. 93–94), the absolutization of efficiency (nos. 112–114), and the dominance of "having" over "being" (no. 94). The risk of new threats arises particularly in the private sector, where data, computing power, and infrastructure are concentrated in the hands of a small number of actors whose activities are not fully transparent and are difficult to control (nos. 95–96). In a broader context, this concerns abuses of truth, particularly in the interpretation of facts (no. 102), and the amplification of particular content and narratives in ways that make falsehood more difficult to distinguish from truth (nos. 134–137, 191–192).

Another alarming problem associated with the use of AI is the lack of a holistic view of reality, accompanied by a weakening of recipients' critical thinking (no. 146). This is connected with excessive delegation of tasks to artificial intelligence or dependence on ready-made answers (no. 100), the shortening of the process of human reflection (no. 146), and the relinquishment of decision-making and responsibility (nos. 102–105). Leo XIV also identifies as a challenge the intensification of subjectivization in assessments of reality and the orientation and subordination of classification criteria to ideological positions (nos. 100–104).

From the perspective of interpersonal relations, one cannot ignore the danger of losing face-to-face encounters with other human beings (no. 100), especially since many platforms are designed to absorb users' time and attention. This is the "digital attention economy" (no. 170). Problems associated with artificial intelligence also appear in the weakening of family and social bonds. Another danger lies in classifying people according to categories of

usefulness (nos. 115–117). The problem must therefore also be considered from the perspectives of economic inequality (no. 164), social control (no. 171), new forms of exclusion (no. 102), the degradation of human effort and work, and reductions in employment resulting from automation (nos. 150–151). These are significant concerns, particularly insofar as they affect the creation of an environment conducive to human flourishing.

Leo XIV devotes particular attention to the use of AI in warfare. He points to cyberattacks, information manipulation, influence campaigns, the automation of strategic decision-making, and the risk of lowering the threshold for the use of force (nos. 182–183, 198–200). Drawing on the thought of Giorgio La Pira, he outlines a path toward a culture of negotiation in La Pira's words: "the method of war must be replaced by the method of peace" (no. 221), that is, by cooperation.

It should be noted that the threats associated with AI identified by Pope Leo XIV cannot be reduced to the technological level alone. They must be considered across multiple dimensions, especially the social and cultural, philosophical, ethical, legal and regulatory, economic, psychological, geopolitical, and military dimensions.

"Neither demonize tools nor idolize them, but guide them": AI in the service of the common good

Pope Leo XIV continues the approach of his predecessors, who also recognized in technology the potential for beneficial applications, improvements to everyday life (no. 4), and communication between persons (no. 9). He recalls that Christian humanism does not reject science and technology but receives them "with gratitude and realism" (no. 129). He also observes that technology is not evil "in itself." "It is not neutral, however, because it takes on the features of those who design, finance, regulate, and use it" (no. 9). Thus, he does not treat technology as a reality inherently opposed to the human person; instead, he emphasizes its ambivalent character and the need to orient it toward the good.

Among the undoubted benefits of AI is "intelligent support" for human activity and improvements in task automation (nos. 150, 152), as well as the potential to increase safety and creativity at work and to serve the common good (no. 129). Leo XIV also recognizes the benefits of AI in education,

particularly in fact-checking and in fostering users' critical engagement with information (no. 137). Artificial intelligence can also make positive contributions to the development of science and knowledge (no. 4), for example in medicine, treatment, the alleviation of suffering, and healthcare (nos. 9, 129). AI can support connections among different fields of knowledge and help people understand complex realities. It can contribute to improved living conditions, personal development, and the acquisition of new professional qualifications (no. 156). Each of these dimensions should remain subordinate to the principles of the common good, social justice, and concern for the vulnerable—that is, the "preferential option for the poor," an essential category of Catholic social teaching.

In Leo XIV's understanding, artificial intelligence should connect, educate, protect, support, and foster the development of individuals. In Magnifica humanitas, the Pope outlines a kind of catalogue of positive applications of AI, particularly in the humanitarian sphere, with due regard for the dignity of the human person and, consequently, for development oriented toward the common good (no. 129). A further dimension is communication: AI can strengthen social competencies and bring people closer together (no. 132). The Holy Father sees another important benefit of AI in education, particularly in the verification of facts and the strengthening of critical thinking among young people (nos. 9, 137). This is complemented by positive applications of artificial intelligence in the economic sphere, where it can help make work more creative and safer (nos. 150, 152).

"Non nova, sed noviter": Truth and the logic of love as requirements in the age of AI

In the encyclical Magnifica humanitas, Leo XIV emphasizes the continuing relevance of Catholic social teaching in the age of artificial intelligence. "What we today call the 'social doctrine of the Church' did not suddenly emerge in modern times; rather, it gathers and orders a long tradition of ecclesial reflection on social life, rooted in Sacred Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and the theological and juridical works of the Middle Ages and the modern period" (no. 29), the Holy Father writes. The guidance of Benedict XV in the encyclical Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum of 1 November 1914 should likewise be taken into account. There he warned against the influence of the modernist

spirit, in which everything bearing the mark of antiquity is rejected with disdain while novelty is eagerly sought everywhere and in everything. Following the principle Nihil innovetur, nisi quod traditum est ("Let nothing new be introduced except what has been handed down"), matters of faith and morals should preserve what has been received according to the rule Non nova, sed noviter ("Not new things, but in a new way").

Pope Leo XIV addresses problems common to all humanity in a new way, framing them as care for our common home together with a preferential option for the poor (no. 43). He recalls the universal destination of goods, critiques the technocratic paradigm, defends human work, and reaffirms the requirements of justice and dialogue. He stresses that "justice requires that new forms of exclusion and deprivation of freedom be prevented: persons and peoples who are denied or have limited access to basic technologies; communities exposed to invasive surveillance; and social groups harmed by opaque algorithms that reproduce prejudice and discrimination" (no. 80). He identifies the building of a civilization of love grounded in truth as an elementary necessity. The primacy of the dignity of the person and personal freedom are continually being put to the test. Hence the importance of Hannah Arendt's observation that "the ideal subject is not so much the ideologically convinced person as the person for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (that is, the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (that is, the standards of thought) no longer exist" (no. 134).

The social encyclical Magnifica humanitas of Pope Leo XIV, "On Care for the Human Person in the Age of Artificial Intelligence," is an important and timely document that should be read from the perspective of the Church's concern for what is human. It offers a critical response to those aspects of the digital revolution and the development of AI that may lead to the normalization of an anti-human vision. It is a document that seeks a more just social order while also recalling the fundamental values that provide the foundation for building our common security.