JUST TECH

The Pope’s Love Letter to Humanity at the Dawn of AI

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LAW & ETHICS

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One of the most pressing questions presented by the prospect of coexisting with intelligent machines, whatever their exact nature is, asks: What makes us human?

In his first and much-anticipated encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas* (Magnificent Humanity), Pope Leo XIV reiterates the Catholic Church’s answer as it has stood for thousands of years. Humans are created in the image and likeness of God. We are embodied, relational, affective, and bear conscience.[1] You cannot have those traits without experiencing vulnerability, failure, and mortality. That AI, broadly speaking, could simulate the output without the corresponding cost, seems like an irresistible offer. In fact, Chris Olah, a cofounder of the AI company Anthropic, who participated in presentation of the encyclical at the Vatican, welcomed the church’s discernment even as he remarked that functional equivalents of human emotions are being discovered within advanced AI models. But you cannot optimize your way to love.

Despite the buzz around the document from within Silicon Valley—the Vatican apparently has been working in dialogue with many in the tech community since Leo XIV became pope—it turns out that *Magnifica Humanitas* is more than just about AI. To the extent that AI represents an alternative moral infrastructure of our times—one that prizes efficiency, bodily transcendence, autonomy and scale, all the while heralding its own inevitability—*Magnifica Humanitas* arrives as a cautionary tale. In it, Pope Leo XIV warns against the prevailing technocratic paradigm that reduces human beings to mere output, resources, or data. As the encyclical notes, we live in a society where efficiency has become the ultimate measure of value.[2] Adjacent ideologies, though percolating at the extremes (for now), such as transhumanism and posthumanism, presuppose that human imperfections can be removed and transcended. In some cases, they argue for the evolution of humanity as we know it.[3] It is all the more

radical then for the pope to maintain that the beauty of humanity arises from all its imperfection and frailties. As the apostle Paul recounted God's message to the Corinthians, "My power is made perfect in weakness."[4]

Unlike his predecessor Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things), which appeared toward the end of the first Industrial Revolution in 1891, Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas* arrives in what is arguably still the cusp of the AI age. *Rerum Novarum* defends labor unions, living wages, and shorter work weeks, among other policies, to address new forms of exploitation that arose during that period. It became consequential, because it named the moral stakes of industrial capitalism and *Rerum Novarum*'s propositions later bore fruit.[5]

Similarly, *Magnifica Humanitas* offers a vision of a world in which technology must serve the flourishing of persons, not the other way around. It is a message with particular force because it bears the moral authority and global reach of an ancient institution that answers to neither shareholders nor states. To hear this message at the beginning of a period, rather than toward the end as *Rerum Novarum* did, is surely intended to be a light that shines through the fog. *Magnifica Humanitas* places human dignity at the center of all Catholic reflection with respect to AI and technology in general, treating it as the fundamental criterion that should guide both technological progress and assessment of its social, cultural, and moral consequences.

To anyone immersed in AI ethics debates of whatever political persuasion, the relevant sections in *Magnifica Humanitas* sound familiar. Technology is never neutral because choices and priorities are already baked into its very design. Participatory decision making is important, and effective oversight is necessary when AI impacts fundamental rights and concerns public goods so that responsibility is defined at every stage of the AI lifecycle. What might not be so familiar is the situating of this discussion within the longer and broader context of Catholic social doctrine. In *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope), one of key documents produced at the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the church is charged to be engaged with the world and the concrete reality of historical situations, a marked departure from its erstwhile defensive posture vis-a-vis modernity. Thus, the potentially existential societal changes that could be ushered in by AI have to be approached in this spirit, guided by principles such as common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity, and social justice. This is the background against which Pope Leo XIV tells us to "disarm AI," by which he means to discard the mentality of domination in the quest for geopolitical or commercial power.[6]

As a high-profile moral intervention that reframes AI risks in terms of the foundational pillars of Catholic teaching, such as human dignity and the common good, *Magnifica Humanitas* accomplishes its objective. For one, it inserts a moral dimension to our discussions on technology, especially one that has a variety of social, economic, and political effects. And second, it lends significant legitimacy to any critique of AI development as we know it today—from the biases in AI models to exploitative data practices to unjust and concentrated economic chains. But AI as a technology is also something strange and uncanny. Unlike the internet, which nobody mistakes for anything but a tool, as revolutionary as it is, AI could substitute human agency, transforming our relationships and society in the process.

To be sure, Pope Leo XIV addresses this somewhat by stating that while AI may imitate language, behavior, and analytical skills, it lacks many things, such as the requisite relational and spiritual perspectives of humanity. But he was making this point as part of a dismissal of the transhumanist and posthumanist movements. AI is transformative enough even without those. Along this vein, Yuval Levin criticized *Magnifica Humanitas*'s negative definition of AI as too narrow and dismissive, which does not allow for a full reckoning of the technology's world-changing potential.[7]

In my view, a shortcoming of *Magnifica Humanitas* is not that it narrowly defines AI but that it could have offered a deeper reflection on what it means to be human beyond or in addition to embracing our imperfections. As mentioned above, humans are indeed affective, relational, and bear conscience. But there are other questions. Is it because we humans alone can have a loving relationship with a Creator? How should we recognize human dignity during this bewildering moment in history? What does human love or autonomy mean today and how can we protect it? At this point, we may not yet understandably know the full capabilities of this technology, but we should have a good idea of what humanity is. The Catholic Church is uniquely situated to provide us with some answers.

At the beginning of the encyclical, Leo XIV juxtaposes two biblical tales: the construction of the Tower of Babel and the rebuilding of Jerusalem organized by Nehemiah, one characterized by pride and the urge to dominate, and the other characterized by community and love. Nehemiah, a Persian Jew who returned to Jerusalem after its destruction, led a collective effort to rebuild the city. The Tower of Babel, on the other hand, infamously, was a story of a united humanity who sought to build a structure in the name of self-sufficiency. These two tales, meant to illustrate opposing ways of how humans could relate to technology, is premised on the Catholic anthropology that human nature, that is, the *imago dei*, remain constant and unchanged and how we forge ahead is a matter of choice. But this framing does not fully account for the possibility that AI could change how humans perceive technology, and as a result, change ourselves in the process. The Catholic saint and one of the church's greatest thinkers, Thomas Aquinas, held that virtue is formed through repeated action, and as a corollary, eroded through disuse. Think of prudence, patience, courage, or even the ability to love. When AI makes decisions for us, changes how we grieve, or shapes our emotional lives, the occasions through which we become fully human are reduced, if not removed altogether.

Another biblical story may be an apt addition then. The prophet Isaiah tells a satirical story about a man who carves an idol from the same wood he had just used for firewood but was unable to see the absurdity. The clear lesson is not just idolatry, but the ability to recognize truth. *Magnifica Humanitas* gives us an imperative to think about the moral and societal implications of AI and the tools to evaluate them, but whether we could retain the necessary faculties to make that judgment is a prior question. Perhaps the church's most important contribution at the moment lies not so much in telling us what AI can or cannot do, or how we address it, but to continually remind us to recognize our own humanity and the love that we are made for, when we encounter it.

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Footnotes

1 Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas* [Encyclical Letter on Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence], The Holy See, May 25, 2026, sec. 97, 99, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/encyclicals/documents/20260515-magnifica-humanitas.html.

2 Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, sec. 92, 93.

3 Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, sec. 115, 116.

4 2 Cor. 12:9.

5 Andrés Biehl and Rodrigo Pérez de Arce, "From Reciprocity to Welfare: Rerum Novarum, Catholicism, and Early Social Security in Latin America," *Religion Compass* 16, no. 10 (2022): e12447, https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12447.

6 Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, sec. 110.

7 Yuval Levin, "Idols of the Valley," *The New Atlantis*, May 27, 2026, https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/idols-of-the-valley.