

01/06/2026

BLOG POST

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“Magnifica Humanitas”, an encyclical as revolutionary as AI



For once, it is a papal encyclical letter that deserves our attention. “Magnifica Humanitas”, an encyclical letter “on the protection of the human person in the age of artificial intelligence”, was published on 25 May 2026: it is a lengthy reflection by Pope Leo XIV on artificial intelligence and the risks it poses to democracy, values, the world order, and, more fundamentally, to human dignity and integrity. Unlike nuclear weapons, condemned by the Church in 1963, the Pope does not reject this technological innovation: he simply wishes to warn against the misuse of digital technology, which he describes as a “space of predation”.

It is striking to see how the papacy consistently manages, amidst global chaos, to identify the major shifts that will affect the world and, above all, humanity’s relationship with the world: in 1963, John XXIII, in the midst of the Cold War, published the encyclical ‘Pacem in Terris’, which condemned not only the use but also the possession of nuclear weapons. In 1991, it was John Paul II who published “Centesimus annus”, celebrating the fall of communism in Europe. In 2015, Pope Francis published “Laudato si’”, warning of global warming and the need to protect the earth for humanity. “Magnifica Humanitas” fits perfectly within this tradition. The intellectual acuity and relevance of the Vatican’s thinking on the major challenges of our time seems hard to dispute.

The message is unequivocal: through more than 100 pages, the letter analyses the dangers AI poses to humanity. To lend weight to this analysis, the Pope invited one of the founders of Anthropic, Christopher Olah - inventor of “Claude AI” - to stand by his side during the official presentation of the encyclical. This Canadian billionaire, a devout Catholic, has made a name for himself through his advocacy for “responsible” AI. He is in open conflict with the US administration over the non-use of his systems for military purposes. The Pope gave him the floor immediately after his presentation, apparently a first in Vatican protocol.

The encyclical first highlights the risk of a return to slavery for workers mining rare metals, and the menace of worsening global inequalities between those who master AI and the rest. Economic stakes are also clearly identified: it is by no means certain that this fourth technological revolution will create new jobs; on the contrary, it is the excessive loss of jobs that worries the Pope. The environmental risk is also considered, given the staggering number of data centres planned and the massive use of the planet’s resources. Next to come are the two major themes at the heart of this encyclical. The political risk, on the one hand, observed through a profound reflection on what is becoming of power in the age of AI: collusion between states and corporations, distortion of the truth undermining the very foundations of democracy, revolution in the risks of war, massive exploitation of humanity by a few powerful who control AI, and so on... The spiritual risk to humanity, on the other hand: the encyclical elaborates at length on the damages done to human intelligence, the commodification of data, the dehumanisation of young people brought by social media algorithms, the negation of human dignity in the pursuit of maximum profit, the culpable hubris of transhumanism which defies nature and the finitude of man... At the end of this lengthy indictment, Leo XIV puts forward two proposals: to impose political controls on the development of AI, notably through a new form of multilateralism free from the obsession of holding power, and to rethink how young people are educated about AI, notably by teaching them to ‘fast’ from AI.

Joking aside, the text reads very much like something Thierry Breton could have written. Indeed, nothing is closer to Europe’s conception of AI than this papal encyclical: the need for political control over cutting-edge technologies, the protection of the citizen-consumer, respect for privacy and human freedom - all values that unite us with this pope, who is American in nothing but his place of birth.

The encyclical also offers a truly remarkable geopolitical analysis. The letter rightly states from the start that ‘the digital revolution is changing the nature of conflict’. It sets out a conception of war that is both traditional for the Vatican and very modern. The notion of a ‘just war’, beyond strict self-defence, was already rejected by Pope Francis in 2020, in his encyclical “Fratelli tutti”. Pope Leo XIV confirms this abandonment of a concept dating back to St Thomas Aquinas. But he also puts forward a geopolitical vision that even the most astute strategists would not disavow. In his view, we are currently experiencing “a gradual world war”, characterised by the continuous lowering of the threshold for the use of force. In this regard, he stresses the urgency of “disarming AI”, by removing its ability to designate targets without human oversight and by preventing the spread of hybrid wars where the identity of the aggressor - and thus their accountability - disappears: “no algorithm can make war morally acceptable”. The psychological effects of AI on social media, insofar as they embed a culture of violence, passivity and resignation, are also in the text’s sights.

Addressed, as is customary, to all the bishops of the world, this encyclical is as revolutionary as AI itself. Against the denial of values and democracy, against the power of money, scientific folly and the thirst for power, the Pope proposes nothing less than a new humanism for the 21st century. In the United States, where 70% of citizens describe themselves as Christian and 21% as Catholic, the stakes are high. Before the publication of this text, the biggest tech companies - Meta, Google and Amazon - had in fact sent their representatives to the Vatican to try and plead their case to Pope Francis. Without success. Steve Bannon, a close associate of Donald Trump and a devout Catholic, has also just sent an open letter to Donald Trump on the theme 'Humans first', and no longer just 'America first': the ideological battle of Trump's second term, between the ultra-conservatives and the tech lords, is well and truly underway. Mutatis mutandis it echoes the great ideological and spiritual battle that Leo XIV presents as the existential choice of this century: "to erect a new Tower of Babel or to build the city where God and humanity dwell together". One need not be a devout believer to find a moral message there that is to one's liking.