



MAIN ARTICLES

Revolutions in Technology from Leo XIII to Leo XIV: Friend or Foe?

Revoluções tecnológicas de Leão XIII a Leão XIV: amigas ou inimigas?

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ABSTRACT: This article considers the ethical implications of technological revolutions from Pope's Leo XIII to Leo XIV. Both faced unprecedented social, cultural, and economic changes, ushered in by new technologies that radically transformed society. Many innovations have benefited humanity, but there is need for human evaluation, regulation, and scrutiny of new technologies if human dignity and the common good are to be protected. Ethical analysis must therefore accompany emerging technological movements¹. This article begins with a brief overview of the Catholic Church's social teaching; it then examines Pope Leo XIV's recent encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, with particular concentration on its anthropological foundations and the impact of technology on war; finally, some concluding remarks argue for the continued relevance of the Church's social teaching in this technological moment.

KEYWORDS: *Rerum novarum*. *Magnifica humanitas*. *Antiqua et nova*. Human Dignity. Technocratic Paradigm.

RESUMO: Este artigo versa sobre as implicações éticas das revoluções tecnológicas desde o Papa Leão XIII ao Papa Leão XIV. Ambos enfrentaram mudanças sociais, culturais e econômicas sem precedentes, impulsionadas por novas tecnologias que transformaram radicalmente a sociedade. Essas inovações têm beneficiado a

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¹ "Anthropic co-founder Jack Clark has called for the ability to slow progression of artificial intelligence (AI), warning the technology is nearing a point where it could develop without human input" (Islam; Hays, 2026, unpaginated).

humanidade, mas é necessário que haja avaliação, regulamentação e supervisão humanas, caso se pretenda salvaguardar a dignidade da pessoa e o bem comum. A análise ética deve, portanto, acompanhar os movimentos tecnológicos emergentes. Este artigo começa com uma breve visão geral da doutrina social da Igreja Católica; em seguida, examina a recente encíclica do Papa Leão XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, concentrando-se particularmente em seus fundamentos antropológicos e no impacto da tecnologia na guerra; por fim, apresenta algumas considerações finais em defesa da relevância permanente da doutrina social da Igreja neste momento tecnológico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: *Rerum novarum*. *Magnifica humanitas*. *Antiqua et nova*. Dignidade humana. Paradigma tecnocrático.

Introduction

The Church's social mission extends back to the infancy of the Christian faith itself; Christ's mandate to his disciples to go out into the world and transform it for the better continues to inspire the Church today as it journeys to the peripheries and defends the voiceless. Christian identity is tied to this social commitment, for love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable. The social doctrine of the Church (often referred to as the Catholic social teaching) is a more recent development, and points to the intellectual framework that articulates the broader social mission. Catholic social doctrine, therefore, is the official body of magisterial teaching that has been formulated and expanded and over the past 135 years, made up of encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, conciliar documents, regional bishops' conferences statements, and synodal documents. Beginning with Pope Leo XIII in 1891, we have witnessed the compilation of a corpus of teaching that addresses urgent social concerns, one that grows as new moments arise in human history. This body of teaching continues today as Church leaders discern the "signs of the times", applying the Christian intellectual tradition to complex issues of faith and justice.

The social doctrine, and the call to be people of justice in the word, are fundamental to the Christian faith. It is for this reason that we read in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (n. 66) that:

The Church's social doctrine is an integral part of her evangelizing ministry. Nothing that concerns the community of men and women—situations and problems regarding justice, freedom, development, relations between people, peace—is foreign to evangelization, and evangelization would be incomplete if it did not take into account the mutual demands continually made by the Gospel and by the concrete, personal and social life of man.

Moreover, paragraph 546 of the *Compendium* reminds us that the Christian does not live two parallel lives, one spiritual and the other secular. Rather, faith ought to have a positive bearing on public life, and the

Christian is called to be an active, responsible participant in discerning the requirements of the common good. The 1971 Synodal document “Justice in the World” (section II), explains this two-fold relationship as follows:

Our relationship to our neighbor is bound up with our relationship to God; our response to the love of God, saving us through Christ, is shown to be effective in his love and service of people. Christian love of neighbor and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one’s neighbor. Justice attains its inner fullness only in love.

What makes Catholic social teaching different from the human sciences is its account of the transcendent nature of the human being. Christians believe that all persons are made in the image of God and that our home, our final end, lies ultimately in communion with God. As Anna Rowlands puts it, “The fundamental theo-dramatic construct of CST lies in a vision of social communion, gifted to us, fractured by us and continually in a process of restoration in which we are active, graced, fragile, failing and resilient participants in time” (Rowlands, 2021, p. 6). Catholic social teaching promotes a way of living that is founded on principles such as human dignity, justice, solidarity, the common good, and a preferential option for the poor. It challenges worldviews that deny the transcendent significance of human existence, or worldviews that aggressively promote rugged individualism, consumerism, and relativism. It condemns political ideologies that dehumanize, sowing hatred and division among peoples, and it rejects the commodification of the person. Human beings, their rights and responsibilities, are understood in a highly relational way, with the person’s journeying toward God understood as an essential component of what it means to be human and to live a life of dignity.

1 Technological Revolutions from Leo XIII to Leo XIV

Most commentators agree that modern Catholic social teaching begins with Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical, *Rerum novarum*, albeit that Leo himself drew from a rich body of theological and philosophical social scholarship that brought the Gospel to bear on modern realities. As an encyclical to the global Church, it carried significant weight and authority, marking an important moment in the life of the institutional Church. For here we find a pope willing to acknowledge the exploitation and suffering of large sections of society, and enter into a robust analysis of the injustices of his day. *Rerum novarum* offered a response to a world being remade and re-shaped in remarkable ways by coal, steam, and the unregulated industrial economy. Workers had few rights, if any, being paid only subsistence wages. They lacked any real degree of job security – unions were in their infancy at this time, and a handful of industrialists controlled the vast majority of

global wealth on a scale the world had never seen before. Poorer people moved from rural settings to urban ones in search of jobs and a better life, resulting in poor, overcrowded housing in cities, social dislocation, and the loss of local ways of life and culture. Poor health outcomes for workers were the norm; high incidences of work-place accidents caused by dangerous, unregulated working conditions, high levels of industrial pollution, and long working hours contributed to low life expectancy rates. Throughout Europe as late as the end of the nineteenth century, life expectancy hovered around 30 to 40 years, skewed somewhat by very high child mortality rates. In writing *Rerum novarum*, Leo scrutinized the devastating social and economic inequalities exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution era. But he offered more than condemnation; he called for measures that were considered radical at the time, including rejecting the contract wage system in favor of paying workers a *just wage* sufficient to support a family.

In this profit-driven world of the wealthy industrialists, the worker was seen as nothing more than an economic cog in a wheel. Employees could be discarded, thrown away as soon as their economic value ceased. They were, in other words, a means to an end, a commodity, something potentially useful in the unlimited pursuit of wealth, but nothing more. What Pope Francis would later condemn as the “new idolatry of money” is not new! The industrial revolution placed wealth as its goal; money was the new god to be worshipped, and workers’ value was measured against their economic usefulness. It is important to note also that the rapid expansion of industry created huge environmental decay. Today we too see how the human appetite for new technologies comes at a terrible cost to the natural world. Data centers, the extraction of rare minerals, and increased pressure on water and oil consumption is having a catastrophic impact on fragile ecosystems across the world. Thus, Pope Leo XIII’s critique was timely and prophetic, and helped initiate a new era in magisterial teaching characterized by reasserting the eternal truths of the Christian faith while also demonstrating the Vatican’s deeper appreciation of changing social contexts.

One hundred and thirty-five years after *Rerum novarum*, Pope Leo XIV signed *Magnifica humanitas* (2026). This important anniversary afforded Leo XIV the opportunity to address the technological realities of today’s world. If Leo XIII critiqued the first industrial revolution, Leo XIV has initiated a serious ethical examination of our current era; a new wave of technological advancement, on a scale not seen before, is being driven by artificial intelligence, algorithmic management, and the automation of human labor. The rapid changes that AI and other forms of technology are ushering in, often damaging to individuals and communities, are at the heart of this latest social document. Leo XIV has published an encyclical of enormous moral significance, but it is important to state that this is not an anti-technology document. The Pope understands the many benefits

that technology has produced for humanity, often in areas like medicine which have improved life expectancy and health outcomes for people, and he wishes to acknowledge these remarkable human achievements.

But he is cautious. Leo is rightly concerned about the negative impact of AI on society, the environment, and on human development. He calls us to disarm AI, to regulate it, to intervene and ensure it is used to serve human dignity and the common good. Leo urges all people to become builders of peace and contribute to a civilization of love through respectful, compassionate, and inclusive language, to revive authentic dialogue and multilateralism, and to pay attention to the perspective of victims and those on the margins. He reasserts the Christian vision of the person, emphasizing the need for connection, empathy, and compassion. And he calls us to become people of wonder – to be fully engaged in the adventure of being human.

Even when limitations are experienced as inner suffering, human wisdom teaches us not to deny or suppress it, but to integrate it. To eliminate suffering entirely would mean, in the end, extinguishing love and desire as well. Those who love and desire cannot avoid passing through trial and suffering; and over the years, we carry within us lessons that leave their mark like scars, the memories of a journey shaped by freedom and failure, dreams and disappointments. It is only thanks to the interplay of these elements that the wonders of the soul occur within us, allowing us to sense the richness of our humanity. To renounce this adventure, both tragic and splendid, in the name of a presumed transcendence of all limits, could mean many things, but it would no longer be human (MH, n. 120).

2 What it means to be human

Pope Leo relies on the Christian anthropological vision to ground his arguments. He insists that “humanity — in all its grandeur and woundedness — must never be replaced or surpassed. We can embrace the technological progress that alleviates suffering and unlocks new possibilities, provided that we do not abandon the very essence of our humanity, namely the capacity for relationship and love” (MH, n. 126). The experiences of love, loss, grief, and vulnerability all belong to the human condition, and give meaning to our lives. These experiences provide additional content to the idea of human dignity. Our affective relations intimately shape our lives and give meaning to the broader human experience².

The concept of human dignity, of course, lies at the heart of Catholic theology, and provides the foundation for Leo’s anthropological critique

² On this point see also Rowlands (2021), chapter 2.

in *Magnifica humanitas*. The concept of human dignity captures belief in the inviolable sacredness of the person, something not based on merit, and not lost through moral failure. As articulated by Second Vatican Council Fathers, a person's dignity can be violated in a myriad of ways; through sub-human living conditions, arbitrary detention, deportation, slavery, prostitution, poor working conditions, the commodification of the person and his / her exploitation for profit, and the selling of women and children (GS, n. 26). More recently, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's Declaration *Dignitas infinita* identifies many egregious violations of human dignity (DI, n. 33-62), while also warning of the danger of normalizing human suffering through the numbing effect of constant, daily sharing of images of human violence. The dignity of all persons, inviolable and innate, requires consistent, robust protection. Technology, for all its wonders, is creating opportunities for the abuse and exploitation of peoples across the world, requiring new, innovative legal protections that meet the current era. The challenge faced is to keep pace with technological innovations and with the ideological arguments underpinning their proliferation, and to be able to respond in ways that ensure the dignity of all, but especially the most vulnerable, is protected. *Magnifica humanitas* represents a critical moment in the Church's social magisterium as it engages with today's technological revolution, and it continues the Church's defense of the inviolable dignity of all persons.

For example, as technology becomes more advanced, capable of extraordinary feats, it is imperative to renew our commitment to the protection of human rights, especially what we might consider a "new generation" of rights. I include here rights associated with mental privacy and cognitive liberty. One might argue for the need to protect epistemic rights, since access to truthful, accurate information is essential for strong democracies and the common good. Pope Leo is aware of this, explaining that:

The search for truth is an essential element of democracy, which is itself a means of contributing to the common good. When questions about what is true lose their appeal, and a pragmatism takes hold that is content with what appears useful or effective, then democratic life is weakened. After all, democracy does not consist of rules and procedures alone, but above all of a solid concordance with the facts and a genuine commitment to the good of individuals and society as a whole. Indifference to the truth leads, slowly but surely, to a descent into totalitarianism (MH, n. 134).

Thus, just as the industrial revolution forced Pope Leo XIII to defend human dignity in an era of widening social and economic inequality, and as the vulnerability of the poorest was exploited by the wealthiest, artificial intelligence and other technologies are forcing us to think in new ways too, with renewed appreciation of what it means to be human in a world of rapidly progressing innovations that are changing how we think, act and relate with each other. Pope Leo XIV warns against what he calls the

“Babel syndrome”, namely “the idolatry of profit that sacrifices the weak, a uniformity that neutralizes differences, and the illusion that a single language (even a digital one) can translate the mystery of the person into data and performance” (MH, n. 10). The concerns that Leo expresses here echo earlier magisterial teaching. In *Antiqua et nova* for example, published in January 2025 by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education, we read that:

Drawing an overly close equivalence between human intelligence and AI risks succumbing to a *functionalist perspective*, where people are valued based on the work they can perform. However, a person’s worth does not depend on possessing specific skills, cognitive and technological achievements, or individual success, but on the person’s inherent dignity, grounded in being created in the image of God (AN, n. 34, emphasis added).

For Leo XIV, AI and other technologies ought to be used to strengthen human agency rather than diminish it³. The gifts of human freedom and intelligence are to be nourished, gifts that are sometimes taken for granted, easily lost, and difficult to retrieve. Agency and freedom are fundamental to being human. As Anna Rowlands (2026, unpaginated) says:

Magnifica humanitas presents human freedom as a gift anchored in a truth that is personal, embodied, and relational. Our freedom and intelligence express themselves through a knowing and loving that is irreplaceably embodied – through care, work, contemplation, suffering and friendship. The encyclical names free human beings as a loved creation, equal in dignity, created for relationship, rational shapers of the world, and a neighbour to fellow humans, without exception.

Moreover, finitude, vulnerability, and suffering accompany the person throughout her life’s journey. The false promises of technology, promises of less suffering and limitless existence, claim that foundational human experiences can be bypassed. But as Fr. James Martin SJ (2026, p. 13) writes, Pope Leo

connects the dangerous idea that human beings are merely workers with the strange goals of ‘transhumanism’ and ‘posthumanism, through which some believe we can ‘perfect’ the human being or transcend physical limitations, illness and even suffering itself’. Technology can be of assistance to humanity, if regulated and designed with benevolent ends, but it cannot replace humanity nor enable humans escape vulnerability, precarity, and suffering.

³ See also: the human person “rightly appreciates freedom and strives for it passionately: rightly does he desire and must form and guide, by his own free initiative, his personal and social life, accepting personal responsibility for it. In fact, freedom not only allows man suitably to modify the state of things outside of himself, but it also determines the growth of his being as a person through choices consistent with the true good. In this way man generates himself, he is *father* of his own being, he constructs the social order” (CSDC, n. 135).

Paul Scherz (2024, p. 128) explains that “transhumanists predict a utopian future of immortality, transformed experience, and material plenty, while those concerned with existential risk see a dystopian future of destruction. Both place what should be God’s transformative activity into the hands of a machine”. Scherz raises other interesting questions about AI, including how it can reinforce very manipulative worldviews, distort emotions, in addition to promising an escape from vulnerability. This is contrary to the Christian anthropological worldview and to the idea of encounter that Pope Francis promoted. Moreover, Scherz argues that AI can be used to deepen existing structural injustices through strengthening bias and prejudice. For Scherz (2024, p. 139), the lack of diversity among the designers of the technology is a major factor here.

Pope Leo XIV is clear that technologies should be designed and utilized to foster just, inclusive social conditions, promote international security, and help secure peace. But this requires prudence. It requires human evaluation and lived experience to ensure its use is appropriate and proportionate. Both individuals and communities must carefully discern how technologies might benefit humanity, conscious of potential harms to integral human development and the natural world (AN, n. 47). Shared decision making and solidarity are vital here. In *Magnifica humanitas* (n. 73), Leo states

solidarity is expressed when each person, both individually and collectively, takes part in the life of the community — by staying informed, engaging with others, making their voice heard and contributing to public decisions and choices — while also assuming real responsibility so that the common good is achieved through shared decision-making.

And, importantly, Sally Scholz (2026, unpaginated) makes the point that

solidarity urges us to resist claims that a particular vision of the future is inevitable. Rather, we are the builders, and our small actions — including our words — contribute to constructing a world in which the common good and care for the most vulnerable among us are the real measures of our success, our magnificent humanity.

Others such as Scherz argue for a virtue-based approach in response to the challenges of AI, and he speaks of the importance of community and subsidiarity as we discern how best to live with new technologies. Importantly, he warns that “interaction with technology shape character in unintended ways. The danger would be that the technology will transform the perspective of the marginalized rather than the marginalized community transforming the technology” (Scherz, 2024, p. 139). He believes that when it comes to decision-making, “reliance on machine recommendations could lead to moral deskilling” (Scherz, 2024, p. 140). In other words, we must remain vigilant, guarding against the temptation to “outsource” our ethical decision-making to machines. It may appear more efficient; it may ease our consciences or help avoid tough moral questions. But this creates

a surrogate for human agency, with the corresponding risk of losing the art of wise moral discernment. And For Scherz, there is the additional risk of bypassing the virtue of care: “People fail to grow in the virtues of care when robots or screens take over caregiving. In these ways, virtue ethics has provided much illumination to the effects of technology on character” (Scherz, 2024, p. 141). This is particularly troubling in the medical realm, where many expect an ethos of compassion and patience to feature. However, placing too much decision-making in the hands of AI can lead to a disconnect between medical care providers and patients. “The loss of the patient’s embedded social context accentuates problems felt by socially marginalized patients. One of the major social determinants of health leading to disease is the loss of community, a loss of people who know you by name and care about you by name”, Scherz (2022, p. 288) notes.

In *Fratelli tutti* (n. 193) Pope Francis made a similar warning:

...the modern world, with its technical advances, tends increasingly to functionalize the satisfaction of human desires, now classified and subdivided among different services. Less and less will people be called by name, less and less will this unique being be treated as a person with his or her own feelings, sufferings, problems, joys and family. Their illnesses will be known only in order to cure them, their financial needs only to provide for them, their lack of a home only to give them lodging, their desires for recreation and entertainment only to satisfy them.

These outcomes, deliberate or unintended, are problematic, for they deny essential components of what we might describe as the call to be human. This call, messy and murky as it may be, is an indispensable part of what Pope Leo describes as the “adventure” of being human. The concerns raised here by Scherz and others are echoed by Elizabeth Bruenig (2026, unpaginated):

Such pretensions to perfection are partly what make AI dangerous. Pope Leo points out that the creators and users of AI are already allowing the technology to make moral decisions—such as by using algorithms to figure out who to hire, whether to fund surgeries, or where to target bombs. This withers people’s capacity to think through these problems on their own, and perhaps more worryingly places the ability to broadly influence these choices in the hands of those who train and control AI technologies. This means that the moral philosophies of tech gurus will steadily guide the moral decisions of ever more people as these technologies gain wider purchase in society.

These vital human skills – listening, thinking critically, evaluating, considering alternative world views – can be diluted by an over-reliance on AI and other technologies. Technology cannot replace the human capacity for relationality and genuine interpersonal encounter; it cannot be a convenient substitute for the patient fostering of prudence, that practical wisdom gained through human experience and moral failure. Pope Francis understood the importance of this slow journey of moral growth, and

called for the building up of a “culture of encounter”. Humans cannot “fully know themselves apart from an encounter with other persons”, he believed. Scherz (2022, p. 273) agrees, explaining that

these generative encounters with others ultimately flow from Christians’ encounter with the person of Christ, who transforms their vision of the world. The Christian learns to see the suffering other with the heart. These encounters with others ideally lead to the long-term accompaniment with the poor that draws people deeper into community.

3 *The technology of war*

A second contribution of *Magnifica humanitas* that I wish to briefly consider is Pope Leo’s robust critique of war. He laments the ease with which war is accepted as a normalized part of political strategy. “Today, however, we are witnessing a real paradigm shift in public discourse and in decisions regarding rearmament, with a troubling revival of war as an instrument of international politics, while the very ethical principles that had previously limited its use are being eroded” (MH, n. 190).

Public opinion is being negatively shaped by polarizing, toxic media narratives that exacerbate both local and global conflict. This is compounded by what Leo describes as “a disconcerting loss of historical memory”. For the Pope,

when historical memory fades and the ethical principles that protect civilians and the most vulnerable are weakened, it becomes easier to justify violence as necessary, inevitable or even “sanitized”. It is in this context that humanity is slipping into a violent culture of power, where peace no longer appears as a responsibility to be taken on, but as a fragile interval between conflicts (MH, n. 192).

The Holy Father also raises concerns about how economies around the world are increasingly linked to war, and how economic interests become “an autonomous driving force behind military decisions” (MH, n. 193). He insists that “No algorithm can make war morally acceptable. AI does not remove the intrinsic inhumanity of conflict” (MH, n. 198). The Holy Father has consistently called for a robust critique of war, and *Magnifica humanitas* provides a timely reminder of the connection between global conflict, technology, and economics. His document is a raw analysis of current trends, and Leo renews his plea for peace. Technology is making war an even more brutal reality than ever before, but technology is likely desensitizing people to the realities of war. This evidence through the language and ideology used to justify conflicts and instill social unrest, while social media has created a platform for destructive narratives to circulate. Technology is offering online space for the vulgarity of war to be excused,

even normalized. Harmful narratives rely on the dehumanization of others and on the promotion of a technocratic and economic paradigm that trumps fundamental human rights. International law and global institutions have proven impotent in the face of a “politics of the strong man”.

Commenting on public portrayal of the Iran war, and especially civilian casualties, Cardinal Cupich noted that “the moral crisis we are facing is not just a matter of the war itself, but also how we, the observers, view violence, for war has become a spectator sport or strategy game” (Taylor, 2026, unpaginated). Pope Leo, therefore, calls for a disarming of toxic, harmful language, and a commitment to peacebuilding that includes more tolerant, respectful, and dignified public rhetoric. And he remains deeply concerned about the manner in which war-technology is progressing, warning of the possibility that autonomous weapons systems beyond human reach, governance or control are now a real possibility. The prospect of algorithms identifying war targets raises urgent ethical questions that demand immediate response. For centuries, the principles of the Doctrine of the Just War placed some semblance of restraint on the activity of war, if not simply because human beings remained at the heart of the decision-making process. To confer such grave responsibility to machines would usher in a new, and incredibly precarious era for the global family⁴.

The violence of war extends also to the natural world. The current US-Israel war on Iran, for example, has created a severe environmental crisis in the region. In the first fourteen days of this conflict, an estimated five million tons of CO₂ emissions were released into the atmosphere. The war has caused massive amounts of pollution due to the targeting of fossil fuel infrastructure, including gas and oil fields. These attacks on refineries and tankers have triggered fires, causing black, oily rain to fall in Tehran. Toxic smoke has dramatically reduced air quality, and these attacks have also threatened fragile marine habitats. Just as US soldiers returning from the Iraq war in the 1990’s developed Gulf war syndrome and suffered from severe lung diseases due to exposure to toxins, we are likely to see millions of civilians in Iran develop catastrophic health conditions as a direct result of the attacks on oil infrastructure. Thus, the indirect deaths from war continue into the months and years after a conflict ends. The “casualties of war” must therefore include future deaths – today’s children who will die prematurely because

⁴ The rationale of the Doctrine of the Just War, with its genesis in ancient philosophy, was to limit as much as possible the occasions when war could be justified, and then to limit the activity during war should conflict be deemed justifiable in some circumstances. Cicero, one of the ancient architects of the Just War framework, understood that war represented a failure of humanity; as rational creatures, humans ought to resolve their differences through the use of reason. But if war is a last resort, its harms ought to be limited as much as possible. The Doctrine of the Just War developed over centuries, with additional principles added to meet new circumstances. For a full account of this Doctrine, its history, and its relevance today, see Mark J. Allman and Tobias L. Winright (2012).

of cancers and various lung conditions. The loss of fragile environments and the uprooting of communities because of pollution further contribute to creating conditions of vulnerability for future generations.

Paul Scherz notes the dangers of the technocratic paradigm and its application to the environment, arguing that this paradigm contributes to a moral reductionism that affects every dimension of human life, including the ecological. For Scherz, current AI technology has profound environmental and anthropological implications. Similarly, Hugo Slim at Blackfriars in Oxford argues that the risk of war at the risk of climate are inter-connected. But, he says,

war has a habit of stealing all the political oxygen and preoccupying politicians and citizens alike with a short-term view. This gives the Church, and all of us within the Church, a particular prophetic duty today: we must continue to speak and act to protect our climate and the natural world around us, and we must convince political leaders that war is not only a disaster in itself, but also a disastrous distraction from the much bigger all-earth threat of climate change (Slim, 2026, p. 178).

Consequently, some are calling for international law to recognize crimes of ecocide as well as genocide in an effort to offer protection to both vulnerable communities and vulnerable ecosystems.

This “new zeal for war” that Pope Leo laments has major economic implications. Today, the global community’s expenditure on armaments has surpassed 1 trillion dollars annually. Governments are diverting significant financial resources to the machinery of war, towards technology that is *de facto* designed to take life, instead of investing it in the social needs of humanity. It is for this reason that Saint John Paul II, in condemning a culture of death, named the stockpiling of armaments as one example of this harmful culture: “how can we fail to consider ... the violence inherent not only in wars as such but in the scandalous arms trade, which spawns the many armed conflicts which stain our world with blood?” (EV, n. 10). It is unsurprising, then, that Pope Leo speaks out so strongly about a “troubling revival of war as an instrument of international politics” (MH, n. 190), and the erosion of ethical principles designed to limit the impact of war. “Humanity is slipping into a violent culture of power” (MH, n. 192), he warns. Continuing, he writes that

modern Babel can be seen not only in the globalized technocratic paradigm but also in the remote clash between opposing imperialisms, between powers that wish to preserve their supremacy and those that aspire to seize that supremacy, resulting in a multiplicity of local conflicts. Moreover, there seems to be no limit to the race — driven by a dehumanizing ambition — to develop evermore powerful technologies or to secure control over them (MH, n. 185)⁵.

⁵ See chapter 5 of *Magnifica humanitas*, for a full account of the Pope’s analysis of the use of AI in current warfare.

Leo remains optimistic, however. He holds firm to a strong belief in the power of forgiveness, compassion and reconciliation, and reminds readers of the need to develop more authentic, life enhancing ways of building peace. Despite the rush towards war, Leo insists that “we can also glimpse a great part of humanity that is striving to remain human and working to build the holy city of coexistence and peace” (MH, n. 185). For this to happen, a renewed commitment to fostering what Pope John Paul II called a “culture of life” is needed. For John Paul this would entail promoting life actively and consistently, and he called all people of good will “to *develop particular ways of thinking and acting which serve life*” (EV, n. 76, emphasis added). He continued: “In this way we exercise our responsibility towards the persons entrusted to us and we show, in deeds and in truth, our gratitude to God for the great gift of life” (EV, n. 76).

Pope Leo, using different language, makes a similar claim. Peace-building efforts require a firm commitment to disarming toxic language and harmful ideologies. Leo is clear: he calls us to disarm with words as well as actions, to be builders of peace and contributors to a civilization of love through respectful, compassionate, and inclusive language, to revive authentic dialogue and multilateralism, and to foster inclusive communities.

Moreover, it is important to avoid adding to a technocratic paradigm by making it a false surrogate for human encounter and moral agency. The Christian calling is to discern modes of healing, mercy, and compassion in fractious times. It is a calling to remain faithful to a vision of the person founded on her innate sacredness and value. It is a calling to recognize in their totality those on the margins who are without a voice, to defend their rights, and promote meaningful, authentic relationship across diversity. The Christian is called to confront a politics of hatred and dismantle power structures that exploit the weakest. And Pope Leo asks the global family to reconsider the absoluteness of the efficiency ethos that is used to justify unfettered technological developments: “When efficiency becomes the ultimate measure of value, human beings are tempted to see themselves as a project to be optimized rather than as persons called to relationship and communion” (MH, n. 112), Leo reminds us.

Finally, it is important to situate this document not only within the broader corpus of Catholic social doctrine, but also to place it alongside the commitment all ordinary people of good will who dedicate themselves daily to the complex task of peacebuilding. Catholic social teaching contributes to this commitment in innovative and inspiring ways, but it cannot do it alone. It must remain in dialogue with experts across disciplines and across faith traditions, in humble service to a belief that a better world is possible for all of God’s precious creation. And it must learn from the lived experiences of the People of God as they struggle for justice in a fractured world, hearing the stories from the peripheries

where our crucified God resides. As Pope Leo says, “We must lovingly safeguard the grandeur of humanity bestowed upon us and revealed in its fullness in Christ, the splendor of which no machine can ever replace” (MH, n. 15).

Concluding remarks

For 135 years, the Church’s magisterium has grappled with rapidly changing human contexts. Technology has developed in ways unimaginable to previous generations, often with tremendous benefits for humanity, but sometimes causing aggravated inequalities, exploitation, and neglect. Technology is an outcome of human intelligence, imagination, and wonder, but cannot be thought of as autonomous. The need for regulation may seem obvious to some, but is fiercely resisted by many within the tech industry. Both Leo XIII and Leo XIV, writing 135 years apart, found themselves in remarkably similar situations that are marked by rapid social transformation, economic inequality, and a throw away culture that raises serious ethical concerns. Called to offer prophetic witness, they belong to a scholarly social tradition in which the Church dedicates herself to the poorest and most vulnerable. *Magnifica humanitas* builds on this long tradition, expanding what earlier popes said and committing the social doctrine to a new world of incredible technological revolution. It is a revolution not only of science; it is reshaping how human beings see themselves and others, and therefore requires careful scrutiny. Pope Leo XIV engages with the realities of AI and technology in an honest, robust, and serious way. He understands the many benefits that AI could potentially usher in. This is not a defensive, negative document, nor is it an anti-technology document. Rather, it celebrates the creativity and ingenuity of humanity, but couples this with deep realism and deep concern. Our current technological revolution demands regulation, and fundamental human rights may require new legal protections to ensure AI serves human dignity and the common good rather than increasing the hyper-agency of a tiny minority. This latest social encyclical provides a creative, hopeful, and honest platform to consider the challenges of a new technological revolution, one rooted in the Gospel call to care for the most vulnerable and to bring peace to our wounded, yet wonderful world.

Abbreviations

- AN = *Antiqua et nova*: Note on the relationship between artificial intelligence and human intelligence
- CSDC = Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church
- CST = Catholic social teaching
- DI = Declaration *Dignitas infinita* on Human Dignity
- EV = Encyclical letter *Evangelium vitae*
- FT = Encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*
- GS = Pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*
- MH = Encyclical letter *Magnifica humanitas*

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The data underlying the research text are contained in the article.