Opinion

Guest Voices



Pope Leo XIV speaks with the College of Cardinals at the Vatican May 10, 2025, during his first formal address to the college. He said he chose his name in homage to Pope Leo XIII, recognizing a need to renew Catholic social teaching to face today's new industrial revolution and developments of artificial intelligence "that pose new challenges for the defense of human dignity, justice and labor." (CNS/Vatican Media)

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In the days following Pope Leo XIV's election, the internet has been inundated with artificial intelligence-generated deepfake videos, images, and messages purporting to depict the new pontiff. These media fabrications, some of which have been circulated on platforms like YouTube and TikTok, present the pope delivering messages he never said, sometimes even in his own voice.

For example, a YouTube video, entitled "POPES WAKEUP URGENT CALL TO ALL TRUE CHRISTIANS || POPE LEO XIV SPEECH," posted on a channel called "Pope Leo XIV Sermons," delivers a fiery 42-minute exhortation about the end times in an AI-generated voice based on that of Pope Leo.

A snippet:

> The sky is heavy with prophecy. The clock of heaven is ticking its final seconds. And I declare to you today: 2025 is not just another year. It is a spiritual alarm sounding in the heavens for all who still have ears to hear. Look around you. Do you not see it? The world is unraveling at the seams.

The entire thing pretty much goes on like that, speaking of signs, warnings, and the end of the world, but without actually saying much with specificity or substance. My guess is that the script is AI-generated as well. I would say the whole thing is silly, except that this channel has over 13,000 subscribers and the video has over 230,000 views.

Related: 19th-century Catholic teachings, 21st-century tech: How concerns about AI guided Pope Leo's choice of name

Most concerning is that some Catholics have been misled by these videos. A friend mentioned that her brother-in-law was sending AI-generated videos to their family's group chat. When it was pointed out to him that the video pages even had clear labels indicating the content was fake, he refused to believe it, insisting, "Why would

someone fake such a beautiful sermon?"

Another friend shared with me that his mother told him that she thought the aforementioned AI-generated video about the end times was genuine. Even after he explained it was fake, she responded, "It was still a good message."

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I sent a link to the video to a priest friend of mine. He responded that they'd just had a parish talk on the papacy, and at one point a participant stood up and shared a fake Pope Leo prayer they found on social media. My priest friend remarked, "This is going to be a massive problem."

All three of these exchanges happened within a five-hour timespan.

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The technology behind deepfakes has advanced rapidly, making them increasingly difficult to distinguish from genuine content. And as the aforementioned examples demonstrate, even a vague and long-winded, AI-generated end-times warning can fool many people. As AI continues to improve, the line between real and fake content becomes increasingly blurred. We all must develop skills to avoid being deceived.

For the past several years, numerous Vatican dicasteries, academies, and institutes have responded to the possibilities and dangers posed by artificial intelligence, and has been on the forefront of establishing a worldwide ethical framework for the use of AI. For example, in 2020, the Pontifical Academy for Life launched "The Rome Call for AI Ethics," a document that has been endorsed by numerous civil, private and public organizations. The call seeks to establish a worldwide consensus on using AI for the betterment of humanity, and stating that "AI-based technology must never be used to exploit people in any way, especially those who are most vulnerable."

Vatican warns against AI being controlled by powerful companies

Earlier this year, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education published "*Antiqua et Nova*: Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence. The note reinforces the point that AI, while beneficial, must always be ethically guided by a comprehensive view of human dignity rooted in embodiment, relationality, moral responsibility, and openness to transcendent truth. The note warns that “while the theoretical risks of AI deserve attention, the more immediate and pressing concern lies in how individuals with malicious intentions might misuse this technology” (Paragraph 102).



Pope Francis leads an audience with participants of the Rome Call for AI ethics meeting, Jan. 10, 2023, at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The risks and benefits of AI were also a pressing concern for Pope Francis personally. In his message for the 57th World Day of Peace in 2024, Pope Francis said, "Techno-scientific advances, by making it possible to exercise hitherto unprecedented control over reality, are placing in human hands a vast array of options, including some that

may pose a risk to our survival and endanger our common home."

In his closing message for the 58th World Day of Social Communications in 2024, Pope Francis warned, "It is up to us to decide whether we will become fodder for algorithms or will nourish our hearts with that freedom without which we cannot grow in wisdom. Such wisdom matures by using time wisely and embracing our vulnerabilities." As the first pope of the social media age, Francis' pontificate experienced the ups and downs of being a public figure in a digital environment.

But Pope Leo XIV seems aware that we are just at the beginning of a new AI revolution and we must be prepared for it. In his May 12 address to the media, Leo remarked that, "artificial intelligence, with its immense potential, which nevertheless requires responsibility and discernment in order to ensure that it can be used for the good of all, so that it can benefit all of humanity. This responsibility concerns everyone in proportion to his or her age and role in society."

As we navigate this new digital landscape, it is an encouraging sign that Pope Leo XIV recognized the challenges we face. I think we are only at the dawn of papal deepfakes. Therefore it's essential for all of us to develop greater media literacy and a healthy skepticism toward sensational content online. Facing the challenges posed by AI-generated content demands that we are vigilant, discerning, and committed to truth in an increasingly complex digital age.

This column originally appeared on Where Peter Is on May 19. It is reprinted with permission.

As of May 22, the video referenced was no longer available on YouTube. According to YouTube, the account associated with the video had been terminated.