News

Man on stage w AI images behind him

Jong-Hee Han, then co-vice chairman, CEO and head of the DX (Device eXperience) Division for Samsung Electronics, speaks about artificial intelligence during a Samsung Electronics press conference at CES 2024, an annual consumer electronics trade show, in Las Vegas Jan. 8, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Steve Marcus)



by James C. Benton

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In one of his first public statements after his election, Pope Leo XIV likened 21st century artificial intelligence to the great industrialization of the late 19th century. He called AI the issue of workers in our time.

As a labor historian who works on issues of trade, workers' rights and urban policy, I teach students to think about policy and how it can affect people's lives. As industrialization and automation eliminated jobs in years past or significantly altered them, AI will similarly displace workers and take away careers. An AI revolution has the potential to instantly transform workers' jobs, industries and livelihoods without regard to race, class, educational status or occupation, becoming another tool by which powerful members of society can make social outcasts of their less powerful counterparts.

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In drawing attention to AI, Leo has acknowledged the role of the church in addressing social needs and promoting greater human solidarity. And he seeks to do this in a world where concentrated wealth remains a formidable opponent, as it was in 1891 when his predecessor, Pope Leo XIII, issued *Rerum Novarum*. In taking the papal name Leo, our new pope builds on decades of interest by the Catholic Church on the relationship between technology and the rights of workers and the poor. And just as Leo XIII stated in *Rerum Novarum*, the new pontiff is signaling the intention of the church to engage other institutions of society on this issue.

Under Pope Francis, the Dicastery for Culture and Education studied the ethical implications of AI. In a report released last year, the dicastery's AI Research Group for the Centre for Digital Culture proposed an ethical framework to realize the benefits of AI while avoiding its potential dangers. The research group also drew parallels between the Industrial Revolution and the present, saying advanced technology such as AI presented "a danger of betraying human dignity for the sake of efficiency, beliefs in progress, and profit." AI makes another danger possible — that of the accumulation and use of power by stronger entities (think corporations, governments and military) against relatively powerless groups or individuals.

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The new pope is no stranger to issues of economic and political instability. In 2007, as a missionary in Peru and prior general of the Order of St. Augustine, Fr. Robert Prevost was a member of the Council of Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Conferences, or CELAM. In its fifth general conference, held that year at Aparecida, Brazil, CELAM devoted a section of its final report (drafted under the direction of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, then the archbishop of Buenos Aires) to the challenges facing humanity amid increasing globalization. Those challenges included inequality, injustice, concentrated power and wealth, and more powerful financial institutions and transnational companies. These conditions, if not addressed, risked creating social outcasts among the region's poor.

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In the 134 years since *Rerum Novarum*, three popes — Pius IX in 1931, Paul VI in 1971 and John Paul II in 1991 — have offered their own takes on workers' rights and labor, building on Leo XIII's work. Time will tell whether the new pontiff will offer his own update of this foundational encyclical.

Given his interest in focusing on social justice, combined with a path that began in the United States and wound through Peru and then Italy, Pope Leo has arrived in the right place at the right time for people seeking refuge from the ravages of globalization and inequality. On immigration and trade, which are also tied to labor, his approach may shift policies in these areas to a more humane place over time.

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Leo's pontificate, and his decision to address AI at its beginning, indicate an opening for worker organizations and labor to rekindle or deepen ties with the church to meet the challenge AI poses to social, economic and political stability. This hearkens back to the call for mutual responsibility *Rerum Novarum* outlined and must be part of the strengthening of human bonds that Pope Francis called for in *Fratelli Tutti*.

Global challenges, like those posed by AI, wealth concentration, inequality and economic and social displacement, require a global response. If Pope Leo's words and actions can inspire greater solidarity in service to addressing the economic issues of our time, we will be one step closer to building a world where workers are more likely to gain and enjoy the rights and dignity that is rightfully theirs.