Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Leo XIV elevates the Book of the Gospels during Mass marking the Jubilee of the Holy See in St. Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican June 9, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



by Enzo Del Brocco

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 4, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The contemporary debate over artificial intelligence is often framed in technical, economic or regulatory terms. Yet for the church, the question is fundamentally anthropological, theological and pastoral. This became especially clear from the very beginning of Pope Leo XIV's ministry. In his first formal address to the College of Cardinals, he compared the present technological transformation to a new Industrial Revolution, explaining that this historical moment influenced his choice of name. From the outset, he signaled that artificial intelligence is not merely a technical development but a civilizational shift requiring moral discernment.

This concern was made concrete when Leo urged the priests of Rome not to rely on artificial intelligence to compose their homilies. His warning was not a rejection of technology, but a theological clarification. Preaching cannot be automated because preaching is not the mere transmission of information. It is a personal act of mediation between the Word of God and the people of God.

This pastoral insight opens onto the deeper teaching articulated in the 2025 doctrinal note *Antiqua et Nova*. The document carefully distinguishes between artificial intelligence and human intelligence. AI systems may simulate reasoning, generate language and analyze patterns, but they do not possess conscience, freedom, moral responsibility or spiritual intentionality. Human intelligence is embodied, relational and ordered toward truth. It is shaped by memory, moral formation, suffering, prayer and lived experience. When a priest preaches, he does not merely arrange theological content. He speaks from a life configured to Christ by listening and living the Word. No algorithm can replicate that interior depth.

Related: Pope Leo tells priests not to use AI to write homilies or seek likes on TikTok

Antiqua et Nova therefore situates AI within a broader theological anthropology that must also be read sacramentally. Technology is not foreign to the human vocation. It arises from humanity's participation in God's creative wisdom and reflects the *imago Dei* (image of God) in its capacity to shape the material world toward meaningful ends. Nor is technology foreign to Catholic practice, including the church's liturgical life. The sacred liturgy presupposes material mediation. Vestments are woven. Chalices are crafted. Books are printed. Churches are constructed. Musical instruments are engineered. Even the bread and wine offered at the altar are fruits

of agricultural knowledge, cultivation, fermentation and human labor. In our own time, microphones, lighting, screens and sound systems assist proclamation and participation. Material instruments, when rightly ordered, serve the sacramental economy.

Yet sacramental theology clarifies an essential distinction. In the sacraments, material elements are instruments, not agents. They mediate grace, but they do not originate it. The efficient cause remains God; the minister remains a person; the instrument serves within an order of meaning it does not generate. Bread does not consecrate itself. The chalice does not decide. The vestment does not preach. Instrumentality presupposes personal agency.

Artificial systems operate through probabilistic modeling and correlation. They process data but do not grasp meaning as a human person does. They generate outputs but do not assume responsibility for them. They simulate language but do not intend truth. Moral agency remains irreducibly human. If this distinction is blurred, the risk is not merely technical confusion but anthropological and even sacramental distortion, in which an instrument begins to be treated as though it were a subject.



Bishop Erik Varden of Trondheim leads the Roman Curia's annual Lenten retreat in the Pauline Chapel at the Vatican Feb. 22, 2026. The Norwegian bishop was chosen by Pope Leo XIV to preach at the Lenten retreat, which was to run from Feb. 22 to 27 and reflect on the theme, "Illuminated by a Hidden Glory." (OSV News/Vatican Media/Simone Risoluti)

This confusion is intensified by what Pope Francis in "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" calls the technocratic paradigm. When efficiency and control become the dominant measures of progress, human beings themselves risk being evaluated according to technological standards. Education becomes content delivery. Communication becomes data exchange. Religious experience risks becoming digital consumption. Against this reduction, Francis proposes integral ecology, a vision in which human dignity, social life, economic structures, culture and care for creation are inseparably linked. Applied to artificial intelligence, this framework insists that technological development must be judged not only by innovation or profitability, but by the kind of humanity it shapes.

The Lenten retreat preached at the Vatican by Bishop Erik Varden sharpened this diagnosis by describing the rise of digital and artificial media as a prophetic challenge. In a world where education is increasingly farmed out to artificial systems, young people yearn for teachers worthy of trust, capable of imparting not only skills but wisdom. His affirmation, "An angelic encounter is always personal. It cannot be replaced by a download or a chatbot," captures the theological core of the issue.



Pope Leo XIV receives children's books about women in science, including *Ada Byron Lovelace and the Thinking Machine*, during an audience with participants in a conference, "The Dignity of Children and Adolescents in the Age of Artificial Intelligence," in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Nov. 13, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Drawing on St. John Henry Newman and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Varden presented priestly ministry as angelic. Angels, in the Christian tradition, are personal intelligences who illuminate and guide. Their mediation is not mechanical but relational. They descend and elevate. They stand before God and turn toward humanity. Illumination is intellectual and existential. The priest, analogously, mediates not as a device but as a person configured to Christ. His preaching is not the output of data aggregation but the fruit of contemplation, study, struggle and love.

Advertisement

The challenge is not technological progress itself, but the displacement of personal responsibility by automated systems. When discernment is outsourced and mediation becomes impersonal, something essential to Christian proclamation is diminished. The church is called to speak prophetically, insisting that no system can substitute for conscience, moral agency or incarnational witness.

Seen in this light, Pope Leo XIV's insistence that priests must not surrender their preaching to artificial systems is emblematic rather than incidental. If proclamation is reduced to generated language, the church implicitly concedes that revelation can be mediated impersonally. Yet Christian faith is incarnational. Grace ordinarily passes through personal encounter. The Word is not downloaded. It is proclaimed.

> If proclamation is reduced to generated language, the church implicitly concedes that revelation can be mediated impersonally. Yet Christian faith is incarnational. Grace ordinarily passes through personal encounter. The Word is not downloaded. It is proclaimed.

As the church, we are called not only to defend human dignity as rooted in the *imago Dei*, but also to awaken and deepen the filial relationship with God into which we are invited through Christ. The human person is not merely an intelligent being; he or she is a beloved child of the Father, called into communion.

This is therefore not only a technological moment but a prophetic one. In an age saturated with artificial mediation, the church must do more than produce religious content or multiply digital devotions to be recited or consumed in passing. She must teach people how to pray, how to meditate, how to listen, and how to enter into a living relationship with God. The Holy Spirit dwells in the hearts of the faithful and enables a true interior dialogue with the living God. Prayer is not data exchange. It is participation in the life of the Trinity.

The God whom Christians worship is not an impersonal system but the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three divine Persons who invite personal and communal encounter. The church's mission in this prophetic hour is to help humanity rediscover this living communion. In a world increasingly shaped by artificial systems, the church must insist that the Word is not computed, constructed or manufactured. It is proclaimed, encountered and made present in the living Christ.