Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Leo XIV wears a Chicago White Sox baseball cap during his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, June 11, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Remo Casilli)



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May 25, 2026
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White Sox fans will be happy to know that on his first time up to bat with an encyclical, Pope Leo hit it out of the ballpark. In truth, the whole world should be happy, although those who only want to make money with unrestrained technology will boo.

The 42,000-word encyclical, Magnifica Humanitas ("Magnificent Humanity"), published on Monday, May 25, deals not only with artificial intelligence but more widely with digital technology and its impact on the real world we live in. And Leo argues Catholic social teaching can help us know how to deal with these technologies and their potential for disruption.

The first two chapters of the encyclical lay out the history and foundations of Catholic social teaching, which is based on the equal dignity of all human beings and the value of human rights. He explains the principles of Catholic social teaching: the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity and social justice.

For those new to Catholic social teaching, these two chapters are a great introduction, and for those familiar with the teaching, the chapters provide an excellent review.

Next, Leo analyzes and critiques the technological paradigm that currently guides thinking about AI and other digital technologies. Following Pope Francis, Leo describes the technological paradigm as “the tendency to let the logic of efficiency,

control and profit alone shape personal, social and economic decisions.”



Pope Leo XIV arrives to celebrate Mass in Piazza Bartolo Longo in front of the Pontifical Shrine of the Blessed Virgin of the Rosary of Pompeii near Naples, Italy, May 8, 2026, on the first anniversary of his election as the first American pontiff. (OSV News/Reuters/Guglielmo Mangiapane)

Here technology is not just an instrument but becomes “the standard by which everything is judged, it begins to dictate what matters and what can be discarded, reducing creation to an object of exploitation and human beings to mere cogs in a system driven toward ever greater efficiency.”

“In many cases,” Leo notes, “within the digital context, control over platforms, infrastructure, data and computing power does not rest with States, but with major economic and technological actors. These entities effectively set the conditions for access, determine the rules of visibility and shape the very possibilities for participation.”

He warns that “When such power is concentrated in the hands of a few, it tends to become opaque and evade public oversight, increasing the risk of distorted forms of development that give rise to new dependencies, exclusions, manipulations and inequalities.”

With the principles of Catholic social teaching, Leo says, we must “assess whether the power of digital infrastructures and algorithms truly fosters participation and responsibility, protects the vulnerable, ensures fair access to opportunities and remains directed toward the good of all.”

In discussing artificial intelligences, Leo confesses that very little is known about how they actually work, even by their developers. But he is clear about what they are not.

They “do not undergo experiences, do not possess a body, do not feel joy or pain, do not mature through relationships and do not know from within what love, work, friendship or responsibility mean. Nor do they have a moral conscience, since they do not judge good and evil, grasp the ultimate meaning of situations, or bear responsibility for consequences.”

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“They may imitate language, behavior and analytical skills, or even simulate empathy and understanding, but they do not understand what they produce, for they lack the affective, relational and spiritual perspective through which human beings grow in wisdom.”

He acknowledges that AI can be a valuable aid, but it must be approached with prudence and caution.

AI systems affect people’s lives, they impact their “rights, opportunities, status and freedom,” and while they present “themselves as neutral and objective,” in fact “they end up reflecting and reinforcing the stereotypes or ideological bias of their designers and developers.”

“Every technical tool embodies choices and priorities,” Leo points out, “what it measures, ignores and optimizes, and how it classifies people and situations.”

Such systems will treat some lives, like those of the poor, as less worthy and exclude them without possibility of appeal.

We must ask, urges Leo, not only “whether we are using a system for good or bad purposes,” but also “how that system is designed and what vision of the human person and society is embedded in the data and models that guide it.”

Leo calls for transparency, responsibility and accountability in the development and use of AI. “Calling for prudence, rigorous evaluation and even, at times, a slower pace in adopting AI does not mean opposing progress; instead, it is an exercise of responsible care for the human family.”

AI should be subjected to an ethical code that reflects criteria of shared social justice, writes Leo. “Otherwise, those who control AI will impose their own moral vision, which will become the invisible infrastructure of these systems.”

Without some controls, “small but highly influential groups can shape information and consumption patterns, influence democratic processes and steer economic dynamics to their own advantage, undermining social justice and solidarity among peoples.”

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The principles of Catholic social teaching can give guidance, explains Leo:

“The universal destination of goods means finding ways of ensuring universal access to both technologies and the education needed to use them.”

“Subsidiarity calls for protecting the ability of communities to make choices and corrections, rather than confining their role to mere oversight after the standards have been set elsewhere.”

“Solidarity obliges us to recognize the hidden, often exploited workers, who sustain algorithmic systems.”

“Justice requires questioning the global distribution of power that decides who in fact can train these models and who is merely subjected to them. Likewise, it means acknowledging that social justice is not only a goal to be safeguarded after technologies are deployed, but a condition that must shape their very design from the outset.”

Leo looks at many other important topics in his encyclical, including transhumanism, posthumanism, the use of technology in war and technology's impact on workers.

He acknowledges that the church does not have all the answers. There must be a conversation on these issues involving developers, scientists, ethicists, government officials and religious leaders of all faiths.

Ultimately, for Leo, "The quality of a civilization is measured not by the power of its means, but by the care it is able to offer."

"The creative intelligence of humanity is a gift that can alleviate suffering and open up new possibilities," he affirms, "but it must remain ordered toward the common good, justice, the care of the vulnerable and creation."

Read this next: Pope Leo calls to 'disarm' AI in major document, warns of technologic threats to humanity
This story appears in the **AI Encyclical: Magnifica Humanitas** feature series. View the full series.