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Pope Leo XIV shakes hands with Chris Olah, a Canadian billionaire and AI researcher who co-founded Anthropic, during the presentation of the pope's encyclical, "Magnifica Humanitas," at the Vatican synod hall May 25, 2026. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Pope Leo XIV made history by becoming the first pope to personally present an encyclical to the world on May 25, yet the document's release was also historic for the presence of another figure: Anthropic co-founder Christopher Olah.

Seated among a row of cardinals and theologians to address a packed Vatican auditorium, Leo and the 33-year-old atheist tech leader made an unlikely duo in championing a partnership between the Catholic Church and the tech industry to develop safeguards for the precarious development of AI.

Olah highlighted the need for tech leaders to be in dialogue with people who are not motivated by the vast sums of money AI tech companies are chasing — some estimates put Anthropic's value at about $900 billion — while Leo said the "gravity of the moment" meant the church must lend its moral voice. One Vatican official acknowledged that inviting Olah was unusual and should be read as a sign of Leo's seriousness in engaging the world.



A copy of Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, "Magnifica Humanitas: On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence," is seen during a presentation on the document at the Vatican May 25, 2026. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

"We haven't usually invited someone from the outside," a senior Vatican source familiar with the event's organization, who was not authorized to speak publicly on the encyclical's presentation, said ahead of its release. "The gesture is in fact an expression of the great willingness and desire for us to enter into or to participate more fully in the dialogues that are going on."

The encyclical, titled *Magnifica Humanitas* ("Magnificent Humanity"), on safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence, offers a sprawling survey of contemporary crises plaguing humanity that are often amplified by the rapid, unchecked technological development that defines the times.

Seated in front of members of the Roman Curia, Olah called for collaboration in the development of AI "between those of us who are building this and those who can see what we, from inside, cannot."

The Vatican's Synod Hall, which has a capacity of about 380 people, was filled primarily with Curial officials, diplomats and academics. Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago sat among other cardinals in the front row; Brian Burch, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, was also present.

Franciscan Fr. Paolo Benanti, a theology professor at Rome's Gregorian University who has become a key reference point for the Vatican on AI issues, approached Olah to shake his hand and gave him an enthusiastic thumbs-up before taking his seat.

"It is enormously important that there be people outside those incentives" that guide the tech industry, Olah said, pointing to pressures to stay commercially viable, the drive to remain on the frontier of research, geopolitical pressure and human pride and ambition, "to be our earnest, thoughtful, critics."

"It is through dialogue and mutual effort, through the push and pull, that humanity will achieve great things," he said. "That is what I see in *Magnifica Humanitas*, and it is why I am grateful to his holiness and to the church for taking up this work of discernment."



Anthropic co-founder Christopher Olah is pictured ahead of Pope Leo XIV's presentation of "Magnifica Humanitas," at the Vatican's Synod Hall May 25, 2026. Focused on the rise of artificial intelligence, the encyclical is the first of Pope Leo XIV's papacy. (OSV News/Reuters/Yara Nardi)

Olah said that the church's voice is needed to "ensure the gains of AI are shared globally," since its development is "concentrated in a handful of wealthy nations," echoing themes from the encyclical.

"It is an unsolved problem, and it is the kind of problem the church has historically refused to let the world ignore," he said, calling on religious communities, civil society, scholars and governments to "take this seriously, to look closely, and to push events in a better direction."

"We need informed critics who will tell the labs when we are failing," he said. "We need moral voices that the incentives cannot bend."

Anthropic has engaged with the Vatican in ethical considerations for AI, even listing three Catholic thinkers, including Bishop Paul Tighe, secretary of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, among the contributors of its Claude Constitution which guides the company's flagship large language model.

In the encyclical, Leo advocated for government regulation over AI companies and decried the "concentration of power in the digital world."

By presenting the document alongside Olah, the pope said he accepted the invitation "to walk together, to listen and to speak and together to find the way for humanity, in this time of artificial intelligence."

"What a great sign of hope that, with our differences, we can listen to one another," he said, without naming those differences. "This interchange clearly bespeaks the gravity of the moment, as well as confidence that, together, we can discern the major questions of our time, and so, the future of humanity."

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Yet the pope went on to identify risks of unchecked technological development, including "increasingly autonomous weapons systems practically beyond any human reach to govern them effectively" as well as "algorithms that can block access to healthcare, employment and security on the basis of data tainted by prejudice and injustice."

"The church wishes, with humility and frankness, to be part of conversations on artificial intelligence," Leo said. "We do not possess technical answers, nor do we seek to displace those with expertise, but we bring a wisdom concerning the human that our present time desperately needs: every person is unique and irreplaceable, a free and intelligent subject with a conscience, capable of seeking God, serving one another, caring for our common home."

Despite the incentives which guide AI's rapid development, Fr. Brendan McGuire, a parish priest in Silicon Valley who has been engaged in the Vatican's dialogue with the tech industry, said the encyclical is a prescient tool to guide the tech industry toward a more ethical development of AI.

Tech industry leaders, "see something in what they're developing that is concerning them, maybe even frightening them," he told reporters following the document's release. "What they have asked for is partnership, and it would be morally reprehensible for us to not partner with them."

"This technology is developing and if we want to influence it, we need to do so now," McGuire said. "That's what the pope is saying in this document: the fierce urgency of this present moment is really now."

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This story appears in the **AI Encyclical: Magnifica Humanitas** feature series. View the full series.