Opinion
Guest Voices



A seagull flies past as Pope Leo XIV recites the Regina Coeli noon prayer from the window of his studio overlooking St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican May 10, 2026. (AP/Andrew Medichini)



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This is the first of a series of columns by Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese on Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*. This piece focuses on the introduction and Chapter 1.

In his new encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas* (Magnificent Humanity), Pope Leo XIV says that humanity faces a choice: Will it "construct a new Tower of Babel" or "build the city in which God and humanity dwell together"? Will it create a "place where the dignity of every person is safeguarded, justice is promoted and fraternity is made possible" or will it create "an inhumane and more unjust world"?

This is a choice each generation faces, but it is especially challenging today because new technologies — like digitalization, artificial intelligence and robotics — have made the impact of these choices even more dramatic.

"Over the centuries, technological development has significantly improved the living conditions of humanity," Leo acknowledges in the introduction to the encyclical, released May 25. But history "has also revealed the ambiguity of tools that can cause harm when not oriented toward the good."

"Technology has the power to heal, connect, educate and protect our common home," Leo explains, "but it can also divide, exclude and generate new forms of injustice."

"In the era of artificial intelligence," Leo warns, "when human dignity is threatened by new forms of dehumanization, ours is the pressing duty to remain profoundly human."

We must avoid "Babel syndrome," which Leo describes as "the idolatry of profit that sacrifices the weak," promotes "a uniformity that neutralizes differences" and attempts to "translate everything, including the mystery of the person, into data and performance."

On the other hand, building the city founded on the common good means acknowledging that God's love calls us to life "in all its fullness" (John 10:10) and communion with him.

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Catholics should "diligently contribute to every initiative that builds a more just world," says Leo, in collaboration "with all men and women of our time, with whom we share in the events, questions and aspirations of humanity." Through dialogue, he says, "we seek to identify new paths for the common good and for promoting a dignified life for all."

"The Social Doctrine of the Church," Leo believes, can make a special contribution to this dialogue because it "is a legacy of wisdom, where we find principles for thought, criteria for discernment and judgment, and concrete guidelines for action."

In the face of developing technologies, Catholic social teaching provides "standards for discernment — the dignity of the human person, the universal destination of goods, the preferential option for the poor, care for our common home and peace."

Concluding the introduction, Leo says we now need to "translate these standards into practices such as responsible planning, the assessment of human and social impact, the inclusion of the most vulnerable, the promotion of digital literacy and guiding research and industry toward justice and peace."

In the first chapter, Leo explains that Catholic social teaching is not a static "external code of ethics imposed from above." It instead develops in response to the historical situations in which people live. New things (*res novae*), like artificial intelligence, challenge "the categories of Social Doctrine from within, calling for their further development in fidelity to the Gospel."

He also affirms that it is not the role of the church to replace the state or impose its views. "The Church thus stands alongside the world without overpowering it," he writes. "She supports with humble firmness the choices that promote the dignity of every person, the cohesion of communities and the good of all."

The Catholic social doctrine does not provide "a repertoire of technical solutions or an economic or political model to be set against others"; rather, it "offers itself as a foundation for collective discernment, helping to recognize and promote whatever serves the dignity of persons, the vitality of communities and the common good."

In the rest of Chapter 1, Leo relates how Catholic social teaching evolved over time through various papacies and the Second Vatican Council. It responded to major social transformations from the 19th century to the present day.

He shows that "within this tradition, the unchanging core of revealed truths regarding the human person and society is constantly intertwined with a renewed capacity for listening to historical situations and for responding to contemporary issues." He argues that his new encyclical stands in continuity with this tradition.

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The first chapter of the encyclical is remarkable not simply in recounting the history of Catholic social teaching but also in its placing this history within the context of the development of doctrine. Catholic social teaching is not a collection of eternal principles that can be applied in every historical context. It evolves in dialogue with the times.

Secondly, the chapter presents the church's social teaching with humility and firmness. The church cannot impose its doctrine; it must be in dialogue with policymakers, scientists and other experts. It does not just teach. It also listens and learns.

The church wants everyone to participate in this conversation about the direction of digital technology and AI. Its hope is that through dialogue and collective discernment, we will choose to build a city for the common good rather than the Tower of Babel.

In Chapter 2, which I will analyze in my next column, Leo lays out the principles of Catholic social teaching that can direct our discernment of digital technology and AI.

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