Opinion
Guest Voices



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This is the second of a series of columns by the author on Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, Magnifica Humanitas. This piece focuses on Chapter 2.

When Robert Prevost chose Leo for his papal name, he signaled that Catholic social teaching was going to be central to his papacy. Leo XIII was the 19th-century founder of Catholic social teaching, which he articulated in response to the Industrial Revolution.

Yet, despite this teaching being around and developing for more than a century, many commentators have referred to it as "the church's best-kept secret" because it has not been as central to the lives of most Catholics as the church's teaching on sex and family.

"We tend to think that when the church is talking about morality, that the only issue of morality is sexual," responded Pope Leo XIV on April 23 to a reporter's question about gay blessings. "And in reality, I believe there are much greater, more important issues, such as justice, equality, freedom of men and women, freedom of religion, that would all take priority before that particular issue."

Chapter 2 of his encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas* ("Magnificent Humanity"), published May 25, might be called the official "CliffsNotes" version of Catholic social teaching. This chapter not only establishes the foundation for his teachings on digital

technology and artificial intelligence, it also summarizes Catholic social teaching for a wide audience.

In the previous chapter, he explained that Catholic social doctrine developed in dialogue with history, culture and science, but here he argues that it also "enshrines a core set of unchanging truths." These include the inherent dignity of the human person, human rights and the guiding principles of common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity and social justice.

The church's social teaching is based on the dignity of the human person, who is created in the image and likeness of the triune God.

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"Created for relationship, every human person is planned and willed by God to enter into communion with him, with others and with creation," Leo writes. "Human dignity does not depend on a person's abilities, wealth or position in life, nor on the right or wrong choices made; instead, it is a gift that precedes and transcends each person, endowed by God as an expression of his unfailing love."

Human rights are an expression of this intrinsic human dignity and are therefore "universal and inalienable." They apply to everyone, including women, minorities and the poor, and "no human power can legitimately deny or arbitrarily limit them."

Grand proclamations are worthless unless they lead to human flourishing. "It is not enough to extol individual freedom or private enterprise," he writes, "if we then allow a multitude of people to continue living without decent work, protections or access to basic necessities."

Because every man and woman possesses an inalienable dignity, Leo affirms that we are required to "shape the way we live together, including our economic and political choices, and the makeup of our cities."

For a Christian, Leo says, "going beyond the narrow confines of one's own interests and committing oneself, within the limits of one's ability, to the common good is a non-negotiable value, as is the promotion of life."

Quoting the Second Vatican Council, Pope Leo describes the common good as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily."

This is not "the sum total of individual benefits," rather "it is a greater good that belongs to everyone, and it can only be achieved, nurtured and protected by our collective efforts."

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"It is the State's responsibility," Leo asserts, "to ensure cohesion, unity and the proper organization of civil society, so that the common good can be pursued with everyone's contribution."

Implied in the common good, according to Catholic social teaching, is "the universal destination of goods." This means that "the earth's goods — soil, water, air and natural resources — are given by God to the entire human family to sustain the lives of all, and that every person has an inherent right to the use of such goods, both now and in the future."

While acknowledging the right to private property, Leo says, "it is always subordinate to the universal destination of goods." The right to private property is not absolute or inviolable. This includes "new forms of property, such as patents, algorithms, digital platforms, technological infrastructure and data."

In seeking the common good, Catholic social teaching about subsidiarity urges social institutions, including the state, to respect and support people's efforts "to take ownership of his or her own life and to contribute to the formation of society."

The principle of subsidiarity, according to the pope, "encourages us to move beyond any form of paternalistic or welfare-based management of societal life, but instead to promote a culture of shared responsibility in a State that values citizens' initiative, and a civil society capable of forging bonds and mobilizing energies in the service of the common good."

It wants decisions "made at the closest level possible to the persons involved, thereby fostering community life and avoiding people being presented with decisions that have already been taken."

Leo notes that subsidiarity and solidarity must go together. "When subsidiarity is not linked to solidarity, it ends up becoming merely the protection of particular interests; when solidarity is not supported by subsidiarity, it degenerates into a form of welfare that does not foster responsibility."

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"Solidarity arises precisely when we decide not to remain indifferent to what happens to our neighbor," teaches Leo, "but instead to transform unavoidable bonds — economic, cultural and technological — into paths of sharing, cooperation and mutual care, embracing the idea of thinking and acting in terms of community."

Solidarity, writes the pope, leads to social justice as "a concrete way of following Jesus and remaining faithful to the Gospel." Justice "concerns not only the behavior of individuals, but also the way in which the structures of society are conceived and organized."

"Injustices do not arise solely from the wrong choices of individuals," points out the pope, "but also from structures, mechanisms and economic and cultural systems that produce inequality almost automatically."

As a result, the church supports integral human development, "a process in which the growth of individuals and peoples encompasses all dimensions of existence and opens the future to subsequent generations as well."

Chapter 2 of *Magnifica Humanitas* is an excellent introduction and summary of Catholic social teaching. It challenges American ideas about individualism and unregulated capitalism.

It reminds us that all people are children of God and endowed with infinite value. It calls us to be in solidarity with people everywhere by promoting the common good and social justice.

It is just what America needs as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of our nation.

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