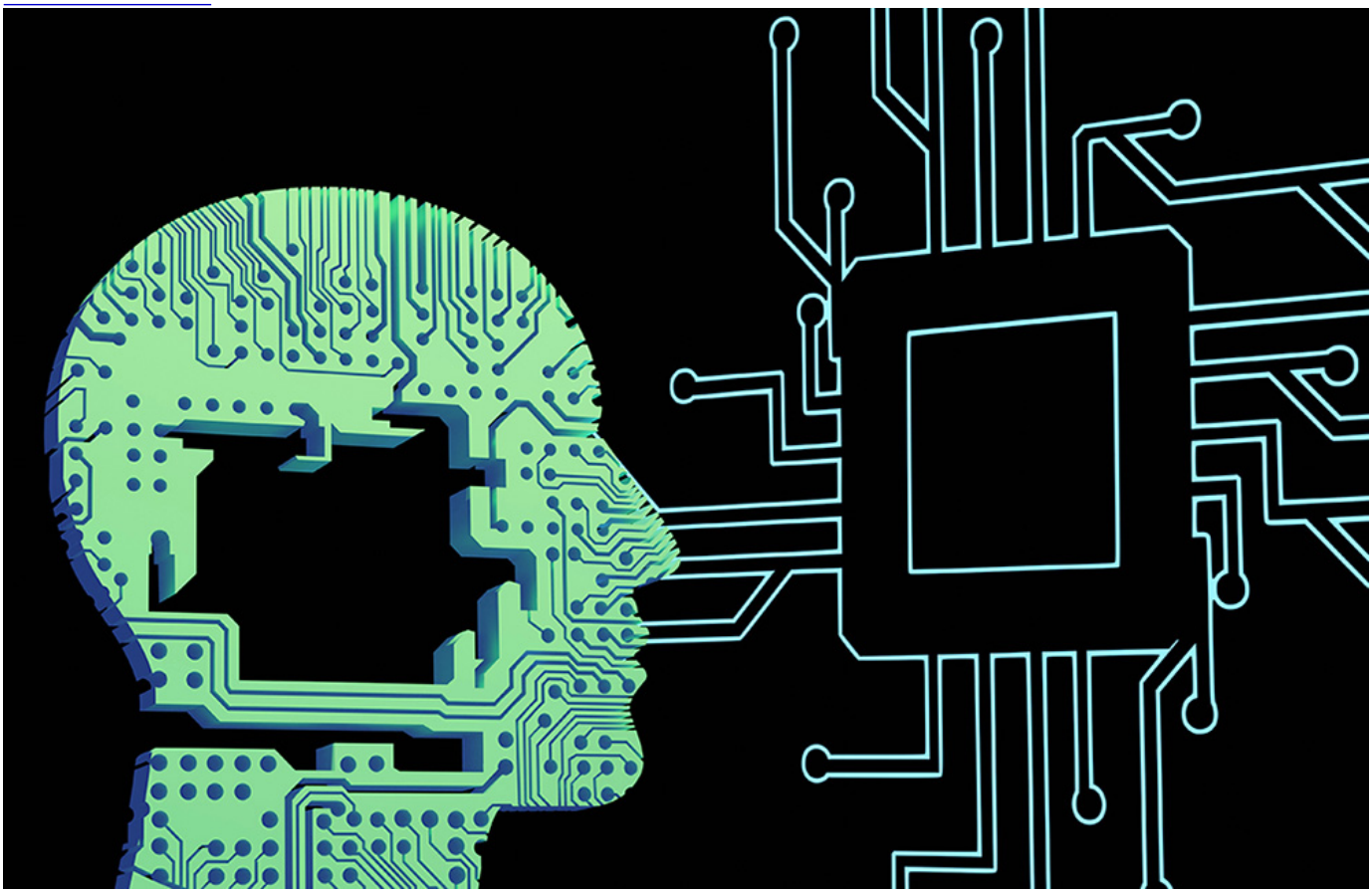
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This is the third of a series of columns by the author on Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, "Magnifica Humanitas." This piece focuses on Chapter 3. For earlier columns, see Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

After summarizing Catholic social teaching in Chapter 2 of his encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, ("Magnificent Humanity"), Pope Leo XIV applies this teaching to modern digital technology, especially artificial intelligence.

In particular, Pope Leo argues that AI should respect human dignity, foster the common good and not simply empower and enrich those who are developing AI.

Like Pope Francis before him, Leo denounces "the growing dominance of a technocratic paradigm in our globalized world: the tendency to let the logic of efficiency, control and profit alone shape personal, social and economic decisions."

When this paradigm rules, Leo argues, technology is not just a tool, "it 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."

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In an age of trillion-dollar companies, Leo notes that the control of modern digital technologies is in the hands of major economic and technological actors who "effectively set the conditions for access, determine the rules of visibility and shape the very possibilities for participation." They can "evade public oversight, increasing the risk of distorted forms of development that give rise to new dependencies,

exclusions, manipulations and inequalities."

Faced with this reality, Leo affirms that "the criteria for judgment and discernment in this new situation are the noble principles of Social Doctrine: the inalienable dignity of the human person, be common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity and social justice." This means that AI should foster the participation and welfare of all people rather than simply serving their corporate owners and developers. There should be special concern for the poor and excluded.

Contrary to those who believe AI can be equivalent to or better than human intelligence, Leo argues that AI models only imitate certain functions of human intelligence. 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," writes Leo, "since they do not judge good and evil, grasp the ultimate meaning of situations, or bear responsibility for consequences."

Ultimately, Leo believes, humans must take responsibility for technology that can impact the lives of people in the economy as well as in wars.

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They can only simulate "positive human communication — words of advice, empathy, friendship and even love," asserts Leo. "The danger is not so much that a person may believe they are communicating with another person, but rather that they may gradually lose the very desire to form genuine human connections." It is only in connecting with others that we are truly human, because God created us for companionship and love. Modern life has frayed these connections, and we do not want AI to make matters worse.

Ethical reflection is essential because AI can "affect people's lives, it touches on rights, opportunities, status and freedom. Important and sensitive decisions — concerning employment, credit, access to public services or even a person's reputation — risk being fully delegated to automated systems," warns Leo.

Quoting Pope Francis, he notes that these systems do not know "compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and above all, the hope that people are able to change," and can therefore give rise to new forms of exclusion for minorities and the poor who are always the last to have access to the benefits of new technologies.

The pope acknowledges that AI systems can be valuable tools, but "they reflect the cultural assumptions of those who designed and trained them, with all their strengths and limitations." In an age of tech bros, while "AI systems present themselves as neutral and objective, they end up reflecting and reinforcing the stereotypes or ideological bias of their designers and developers."

Leo argues that if AI is fundamentally flawed in its design, then a user can't escape biased outcomes. It's a form of original sin, to put it in Catholic terms. "If a system is designed or used in a way that treats some lives as less worthy, or excludes them without the possibility of appeal," Leo continues, "then it is not merely a tool 'to be used well,' since it has already introduced criteria that contradict the inalienable dignity of the human person."

As a result, for Leo, we must examine not only how a system is used but also how it is designed and "what vision of the human person and society is embedded in the data and models that guide it."

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In a challenge to Silicon Valley's credo of "moving fast and breaking things," Leo calls "for prudence, rigorous evaluation and even, at times, a slower pace in adopting AI."

Nor is he adverse to government regulation of AI, an anathema to many in Silicon Valley. "It is not enough to invoke ethics in the abstract," writes Leo. "Robust legal frameworks, independent oversight, informed users and a political system that does not abdicate its responsibility are required."

Leo fears that with AI "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."

He calls for "disarming AI" where companies and nations are in "a race for ever more powerful algorithms and larger datasets, driven by the desire to secure geopolitical

or commercial dominance." He wants to discredit "the assumption that technical power automatically confers the right to govern."

Leo also questions the transhumanism and posthumanism movements, where incapacity, illness, old age, suffering and vulnerability are seen as defects to be corrected, rather than as realities through which our humanity matures and opens itself to relationship.

Instead, "we must remember that humanity flourishes not despite limitations, but often through them." It is our limitation that inspires compassion, generosity and "opens us to recognizing the face of God and others."

Related: Pope Leo proclaims Catholic Church's best-kept secret in 'Magnifica Humanitas'

"We can embrace the technological progress that alleviates suffering and unlocks new possibilities," affirms Leo, "provided that we do not abandon the very essence of our humanity, namely the capacity for relationship and love."

True transcendence for human beings comes "not through an escape from reality or a contempt for their limitations, but through their fulfillment in love."

But if "power grows while the heart withers and human bonds fray," concludes Leo, "then we are faced with a new form of Babel — a construction that is grandiose, yet fundamentally dehumanizing."

Leo believes the AI revolution will be just as impactful as the Industrial Revolution was in the time of his predecessor Pope Leo XIII. Leo XIV sees value but also dangers in AI. He argues its development and use should be guided by a respect for human dignity. It should serve the welfare of all humanity and not just the rich and powerful. It needs ethical guardrails not only in its use but also in its very design.

Whether Silicon Valley and Washington will listen to his pleas remains to be seen, but he has laid out the issues for developers, policymakers and the public. Let us hope and pray that he starts a conversation that can guide the development and use of AI.

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