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Francesco Cesareo

Francesco Cesareo, then chairman of the National Review Board, speaks on the first day of the spring general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore June 11, 2019. The Philadelphia-based adjunct professor of history at both St. Charles Borromeo Seminary and Villanova University is one of the newest members of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences. (OSV News/CNS/Bob Roller)



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Pope Leo XIV has added one of America's leading Catholic educators with expertise in the connection between history and the faith to a key pontifical commission focused on preserving truth, at a time when the Holy Father is warning of how a failure to accurately understand history could lead to a politically and technologically more dangerous future for the world.

Philadelphia-based Francesco Cesareo, whose appointment was announced Aug. 25, is one of the newest members of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences.

"It's very much a research-oriented commission that helps to advise the Holy Father and the Curia when it comes to questions of historical importance," said Cesareo, who is currently an adjunct professor of history at both St. Charles Borromeo Seminary and Villanova University, Pope Leo's alma mater.

"The work of the commission is to preserve and to nurture historical truth and then to pass it on to the next generation," he told OSV News.

The committee, launched by Pope Pius XII in 1954, came nine years after the end of World War II. It came from what the committee called "perspective radically renewed by the progress made in the historical sciences" since the war, which was replete with political propaganda and ideology-based information control that often disguised horrific truths about the actions of the war's combatants.

"That's one of the goals of the commission," said Cesareo, "to ensure that historical truth is accessible and is communicated and not distorted by whatever ideological perspective one may have."

Cesareo is the sole American on the Vatican committee as of Sept. 23. He is also the president emeritus of Assumption University in Worcester, Massachusetts. He has taught or led academic departments at Albertus Magnus College in New Haven, Connecticut; John Carroll University in Cleveland; Duquesne University in Pittsburgh; and St. John's University in New York City. His educational background has included numerous roles of study at the Vatican and in universities in Rome.

Cesareo's new role at the pontifical commission involves supporting and enacting ways of safeguarding and sharing truth and fact, and their relationship with the Catholic faith.

"The church has a rich treasury of historical data and evidence that goes back centuries," Cesareo said, "and to be able to ensure that that patrimony is available to scholars and to future generations is critical to continuing to delve into historical truth and the importance of historical truth."

Indeed, the understanding of objective truth and the capability for powerful owners of technology like artificial intelligence, or AI, to falsely skew perception of that truth

was part of Pope Leo's motivation for writing his groundbreaking encyclical letter, *Magnifica Humanitas*.

"When people come to believe that nothing is genuinely true and that principles are hollow words, then the fuse in their hearts is lit for new eruptions of intolerance and aggression," the pope wrote in *Magnifica Humanitas*, which was released in May.

During the Aug. 25 Cardinals' Forum at the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Ambler, Pennsylvania, outside Philadelphia, Cesareo shared that history acts as the foundational framework for the whole encyclical. He explained how the pope saw the "loss of historical memory" could lead to "potentially dire consequences, which he characterizes as historical nihilism."

"Pope Leo explicitly states in this chapter that artificial intelligence is not just a passing crisis to be managed, but a historic shift that challenges the categories of Catholic social doctrine from within," Cesareo said.

Father Thomas Dailey, the John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics & Social Communications and project director of the seminary's Catholic Preaching Institute, emceed and presented during the Cardinals' Forum with Cesareo.

"Catholic social doctrine is basically a theology of history in terms of how the Church navigates, not in isolation, but navigates by journeying through a particular time and a particular moment so that the Gospel becomes the means by which we can answer the fundamental questions so that humanity is not alienated," Dailey said.

He added, "If anyone is going to have at least some influence on the pope's thinking along this journey, it will be Dr. Cesareo."

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