

Yes, We Can Still Use AI: Pope Leo XIV's Encyclical Isn't Anti-technology; It's Pro-Human

Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical "Magnifica Humanitas" resists the temptation to reject technological advances like artificial intelligence, and instead offers a serious moral evaluation of what happens when such powerful tools outrun the human purposes they are supposed to serve.

William Nardi | Zeale | June 30, 2026

<https://zeale.co/news/articles/yes-we-can-still-use-ai-pope-leo-xivs-encyclical-isnt-anti-technology-its-pro-human>

One of the easiest mistakes to make with Pope Leo XIV's "Magnifica Humanitas" is to read it as a warning against artificial intelligence itself. The encyclical is not a rejection of technological progress but a serious moral examination of what happens when powerful tools outrun the human purposes they are supposed to serve.

As someone who works in business analytics and uses AI every day, I'm genuinely grateful for this technology. I also agree with the Holy Father that these tools can easily get out of hand.

"Magnifica Humanitas" literally translates to magnificent humanity, a salient reminder that for as amazing as technology can be, humans are truly magnificent. His premise is that given the hype and performance of AI, it can be easy to forget its limitations, tempting human beings to let it decide too much.

That is the heart of the matter: Pope Leo is not speaking like a man afraid of the future. He is speaking as a pastor who understands that the future will be judged by whether it protects the dignity of the human person.

What makes his encyclical so compelling is that it meets the development of artificial intelligence within the long tradition of Catholic social teaching, where the central question is always whether developments are directed toward the common good of humanity.

AI's great at calculations but will never understand providence

Beyond text and image generation, those of us building with these tools know there is no going back. AI can help a neophyte in programming bridge gaps that used to require years of experience. It can crunch numbers, speed up analysis, and detect patterns across large datasets that support discoveries in medicine, science, and business.

That practical usefulness matters. In the right hands, it can expand human capability in serious ways, making good people more effective at the work they do.

But usefulness is not the same thing as wisdom. AI can accelerate work without understanding the greater context of how God's providence is working in everyday life. That can be extremely helpful in human hands and still profoundly limited on its own. That is why the encyclical's caution is not a rejection of progress but a reminder that at the end of the day it must serve humans, not the other way around.

Pope Leo's language is direct on this point. He warns that "important and sensitive decisions — concerning employment, credit, access to public services or even a person's

reputation — risk being fully delegated to automated systems that do not know ‘compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and above all, the hope that people are able to change.’”

That sentence gets to the heart of the issue. AI is not capable of genuine mercy — if anything, it’s a cheap imitation.

Intelligence isn’t everything

Working with these tools, I’ve also seen countless times how unhelpful they can be. AI is only as good as the data it is fed and the structure of the models underneath it. It can speak with extraordinary confidence even when it is wrong. And even when it is right, it may not be the thing you actually need.

That is one of the deepest lessons of the whole debate. AI often sounds more authoritative than it is. It can generate fluent answers, but fail to truly grasp the human experience or how morals shape right judgement. Human life is not managed well by confidence alone.

This is where the encyclical becomes especially strong. It is not about humiliating AI; it is about defending the dignity of human beings. Pope Leo reminds us that Jesus identifies with “the lowly, the sick, the imprisoned and strangers.” That is not sentimental language. It is the center of the Christian moral vision.

The document also warns that “intelligence, when absolutized, overshadows other essential dimensions of life, such as affection, the will, commitment and relationships. Similarly, technical power, if left unbalanced, does not make us more capable; it makes us more isolated and more vulnerable to being dominated and excluded.”

That is a remarkably lucid diagnosis of the digital age. Intelligence without affection becomes lifeless. Power without balance is prone to dominate and becomes isolating.

AI could be a Tower of Babel or restore the walls of Jerusalem

Throughout his encyclical, Pope Leo continuously references two Biblical examples: the construction and fall of the tower of Babel, and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in Nehemiah. On its surface, Babel seems like a story about human progress, unified by a shared language that is ultimately thwarted by a petty God to remind us who’s really in charge. The lesson, however, is that when humans pursue Babel, we end up scattered on our own.

That is a useful image for AI today. On the surface, AI can look like unity by tying together knowledge across the internet in a single translated language. But if the foundation is the accumulation of power for oneself rather than compassion; the result is anti-social. People become easier to sort, manage, flatten, dominate, and exclude. A common language does not automatically create common life.

Jerusalem is different. The rebuilding of the city is communal, patient, local, and ordered toward God and neighbor. It preserves distinction while orienting everyone toward a shared good. That is the better model for AI. The technology should help human communities flourish without dissolving their identities into a centralized machine order.

As the encyclical puts it, the quality of a civilization is measured not by the power of its means, but by its care and by its ability to recognize the other as a face, rather than a function.

Subsidiarity can start to fix the issues with AI implementation

Pope Leo notes that the power of these systems is growing faster than the ability of states to regulate their outputs well. We have already seen the violent, deceptive, and harmful content AI can generate when misused.

In response, Pope Leo calls on subsidiarity, one of the crown jewels of Catholic social teaching — the principle that the role of individuals, families, local communities, and intermediary organizations should not be replaced by higher-level authorities. In plain terms, higher levels of power shouldn't micromanage the affairs of lower levels, should only get involved if absolutely necessary, and only for as long as necessary to restore order before pulling out of involvement.

From this principle, the Holy Father brilliantly suggests that local authorities should have the ability to set limits based on the moral and cultural values of the communities they serve, just as citizens participate in government through local and representative structures.

This is not a radical idea. It is similar to the American principle of federalism, which decentralizes power rather than concentrating it in one place. Right now, too much of AI is centralized in the hands of technocratic billionaires and major institutions that shape the technology without enough democratic accountability.

For anyone who finds that unpalatable, consider the business analogy. If a private company can set its own AI policy for the good of its employees and operations, why can't communities identify where the technology is harmful and direct it toward human flourishing? That is subsidiarity applied to a new era.

AI use must serve the common good

This technology must be made to serve the common good of all creation. AI is built on thousands of years of human knowledge and development. Language itself has been shaped by those who came before us. In that sense, we are deeply indebted to the human race that made our present possible.

Pope Leo's moral point is simple: No person should be treated as expendable for the sake of development.

AI can be used well in commerce when it frees people from repetitive work and allows them to focus on judgment, creativity, and care. But it becomes harmful when it is used to turn human beings into rigid compliance units, such as call center receptionists forced to read from a script rather than responding personally.

The same applies to the broader costs of AI. It consumes electricity and water, and it depends on labor that is often hidden from view, including content moderation work that can expose people to disturbing material. If we want to use this technology humanely, we have to find ways to moderate content through alternate and less disturbing means.

There is also the problem of data. AI systems know too much about individual users, and people should be careful about what they share. Premium privacy protections, including non-memory-storing options, should not be luxuries. They should be baseline expectations, no different than visiting a website that allows you to pick your cookie preferences.

A human future

Another profoundly human point Pope Leo makes is that error is part of moral life. He is not saying mistakes are good. He is saying that, for people, mistakes can become part of conversion.

“For an algorithm, an error is a flaw to be corrected; for a person, however, an error can be a catalyst for profound change,” he wrote.

That is a beautiful line because it reminds us that people are not just outcomes. They are beings capable of repentance, growth, and grace.

That is also why AI cannot replace people. Even if it learns to imitate moral speech, moral judgment cannot be reduced to calculation, because it requires conscience, responsibility, and recognition of the other as a person. Only people can practice mercy. Only people can forgive. Only people can be called to conversion.

“The civilization of love will not arise from a single or spectacular gesture,” he writes, “but from the sum total of small and steadfast acts of fidelity that serve as a bulwark against dehumanization.”

That is the right lens for this whole debate. We are not going to humanize AI through one grand gesture. We will do it through discipline, local judgment, careful use, moral limits, and a renewed respect for the people behind every system.

He nears his conclusion with a line that should guide every Christian and every serious user of the technology: “Let us invest in education, beginning with ourselves! We all need to learn how to engage with the digital world in a human way, as an integral part of our education in the faith and in a life lived according to the Gospel.”

That is the real invitation of “Magnifica Humanitas”: not fear or triumphalism but responsibility. The future of AI will not be decided only by what the technology can do. It will be decided by whether we still know how to recognize the face of another person — and whether we are willing to build a world where power serves care.