Skynet and the Holy See: *Magnifica Humanitas* and Legal Norms for the AI Revolution

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This essay considers the 2026 papal encyclical Magnifica Humanitas (or MH) and its concrete implications for law. The legal ramifications of this landmark document promulgated by Pope Leo XIV sit at the intersection of human rights, international law, and administrative regulation of technology, business, labor, and entitlements. Although papal encyclicals operate as expressions of Church doctrine and ethics, they sometimes function within the international legal order as powerful vectors for framing and norm-generation that lead to legal change. This encyclical was clearly crafted to impact public discourse, law, and policy related to artificial intelligence (AI). By casting Magnifica Humanitas as a digital analog to Pope Leo XIII's 1891 Rerum Novarum, the Holy See has articulated a careful critique of AI regulation. This essay considers the documentary sources of Catholic social teaching relied on in MH, including both predictable and novel rhetorical moves used to evaluate the challenges posed by AI. It then turns to the likely policy applications of MH in the areas of human rights, privacy, labor, business organization, environmental, and international law (particularly the law of armed conflict). Although the document addresses all of these challenges, the most urgent threat identified by Magnifica Humanitas is the calamitous potential for autonomous weapons and AI agency to kill.

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INTRODUCTION 2
I. THE DOCUMENTARY BASIS FOR CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING IN MH 3
A. ENCYCLICALS 3
B. SOURCES AND ANNOUNCEMENT 4
1. SCRIPTURE 5
2. MAGISTERIAL DOCUMENTS 6
3. CATHOLIC IMAGINATION 8
4. UNIVERSAL CONNECTIONS 9
5. THE ANNOUNCEMENT AND PRESS BRIEFING 12
C. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK 12
1. AI DIRECTED TO THE TOWER OF BABEL 12
2. AI SERVING TO RESTORE THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM 13
D. THE CENTRALITY OF DIGNITY 14
1. MORAL DIGNITY 14
2. SOCIAL DIGNITY 15
3. EXISTENTIAL DIGNITY 15
4. ONTOLOGICAL DIGNITY 15
5. DIGNITY AS THE BASIS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS 16
II. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS 16
A. HUMAN DIGNITY REQUIRING LEGAL PROTECTION FROM HARMS CREATED BY AI 16
B. REGULATORY PRESSURES ON DATA GOVERNANCE AND LABOR LAW 18
C. DISRUPTION OF THE LAW OF WAR 19
D. THE TRANSNATIONAL ENFORCEMENT GAP 21
CONCLUSION 22

INTRODUCTION

This essay considers the 2026 papal encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* (or MH)[1] and its concrete implications for law. The legal ramifications of this landmark document promulgated by Pope Leo XIV sit at the intersection of human rights, international law, and administrative regulation of technology, business, labor, and entitlements. Although papal encyclicals operate as expressions of Church doctrine and ethics (instruments of ordinary magisterial teaching) and are not intended to serve as policy blueprints,[2] they sometimes function within the international legal order as powerful vectors for framing and norm-generation that lead to legal change.[3]

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1. POPE LEO XIV, ENCYCLICAL LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS: ON SAFEGUARDING THE HUMAN PERSON IN THE TIME OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (2026) [hereinafter Magnifica Humanitas or MH].

2. *See e.g.*, Michael Zängle, *Trends in Papal Communication: A Content Analysis of Encyclicals, from Leo XIII to Pope Francis*, 39 HIST. SOC. RSCH. 329 (2014).

3. This has happened in recent memory. The encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, issued by Pope Francis I in 2015, is widely considered to have been a fulcrum for building global consensus on stewardship of the environment. *See e.g.*, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, *Integrating Ecology and Justice: The Papal Encyclical*, 91 THE Q. REV. OF BIOLOGY 261 (2016).

This encyclical was clearly crafted to impact public discourse, norms, and policy related to artificial intelligence (AI).

By situating *Magnifica Humanitas* within the lineage of Catholic social teaching and casting it as a contemporary digital analog to Pope Leo XIII's 1891 *Rerum Novarum* (discussed in detail later), the Holy See[4] has articulated a structured critique of technocratic governance with several legal implications. This essay will consider the documentary sources of Catholic social teaching relied on in MH, including both predictable and novel rhetorical moves used to evaluate the challenges posed by AI. It will then turn to the likely policy applications of MH in the areas of human rights, privacy, labor, business organization, environmental, and international law (particularly the law of armed conflict). Although the document addresses all of these ethical challenges, the most urgent threat is the potential for autonomous weapons and AI agency to kill (thus the reference to Skynet, the AI that sought to exterminate humanity in *The Terminator* films).

I. THE DOCUMENTARY BASIS FOR CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING IN MH

Catholic Social Teaching is a documentary tapestry rooted in scripture and the traditions of the Church, most clearly elaborated in Church councils and Papal encyclicals. *Magnifica Humanitas* is a paradigmatic example of an encyclical and sets the tone for Pope Leo XIV's papacy, much as *Laudato Si'* (discussed later) became the landmark doctrinal pronouncement of Pope Francis I.

A. Encyclicals

In the Catholic context, scripture is interpreted in light of tradition.[5] Therefore, any analysis of the scriptural implications for addressing AI must consider Catholic tradition, most importantly the magisterial or institutional understandings of scripture found in documents such as papal encyclicals.[6] MH clearly considers itself a sequel to *Rerum Novarum,* the encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII on May 15, 1891, which addressed the challenges of the Industrial Revolution and the Machine Age.[7] MH's spiritual predecessor is arguably the first clear institutional attempt by the Catholic

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4. The institutions of the Papacy and the Vatican. For example, ambassadors to Vatican City are referred to as ambassadors to the Holy See.

5. *See* Pope Paul VI, *Dei Verbum*, DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II § 7 (1965) ("But in order to keep the Gospel forever whole and alive within the Church, the Apostles left bishops as their successors, 'handing over' to them 'the authority to teach in their own place.' This sacred tradition, therefore, and Sacred Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments are like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything, until she is brought finally to see Him as He is, face to face.").

6. *See generally* FRANCIS A. SULLIVAN, S.J., MAGISTERIUM: TEACHING AUTHORITY IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (Paulist Press 1983) 130–131 (Papal encyclicals, the documents of ecumenical councils such as Vatican II, and teaching by synods or conferences of bishops constitute magisterial sources of authority within Catholicism.).

7. Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum (The Condition of Labor)* (1891), *reprinted in* CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT: THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE 28 (David J. O'Brien & Thomas A. Shannon eds., Orbis Books 2001).

Church to develop a body of social thought.[8] Although it was intended to provide a response to modernism and burgeoning socialism, it does not unequivocally legitimize the emerging industrial and capitalist order of Western Europe and the United States.[9] Instead, it identifies with the plight of the working poor and reflects on the relationships between the Catholic Church, governments, business, and labor.[10] It opposes both class struggle and unbridled competition.[11] The current Pope's choice to take the name Leo clearly establishes a connection with both Pope Leo XIII and *Rerum Novarum*, responding to the Industrial Revolution.[12] Pope Leo XIV has made it clear that he believes that the technology transforming society today is likely more profound than that which prompted Pope Leo XIII to issue his encyclical in the 19th century.[13] That encyclical rests primarily on a vision of the dignity of the human person, particularly workers in the emerging economies of the Industrial Revolution and in the face of radical challenges to the economic and social order.[14] *Rerum Novarum* has formed the basis of Catholic support for labor in the 20th and 21st centuries, though, admittedly, Catholic institutions have not always been consistent in practice.[15] I expect that Pope Leo XIV anticipated MH as a necessary response to the AI Revolution that would likely set the tone for his papacy.

B. Sources and Announcement

Catholic social thought expressed in encyclicals like MH relies on a variety of sources, collectively considered the tradition of the Church. This typically begins with canonical scriptural sources, which are common to most Christian denominations.[16] However, these sources are viewed through the lens of "Magisterial" teaching, that is, the formal doctrinal pronouncements of the Catholic Church, most importantly Papal encyclicals and documents issued by Church

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8. *Id.*

9. *Id.* §§ 15, 19, 20, 35 (rejecting class struggle but acknowledging that the contemporary economic order disadvantages the poor and working classes unjustly).

10. *See generally*, A. M. C. Waterman, *The Intellectual Context of "Rerum Novarum"*, 49 REV. SOC. ECON. 465 (1991).

11. *Id.*

12. *See* William S. Cossen, *The History Behind Pope Leo XIV's Name*, TIME MAG. (May 29, 2025), https://time.com/7288305/history-pope-leo-xiv-name/.

13. *See* Nathan Schneider, *Pope Leo XIV compares AI to the Industrial Revolution – as new alternatives to big AI firms take shape*, THE CONVERSATION (May 26, 2026), https://theconversation.com/pope-leo-xiv-compares-ai-to-the-industrial-revolution-as-new-alternatives-to-big-ai-firms-take-shape-283249.

14. Pope Leo XIII, *supra* note 7, § 37 ("Rights must be religiously respected wherever they exist . . . Still, when there is question of defending the rights of individuals, the poor and badly off have a claim to especial consideration.").

15. *See* Waterman, *supra* note 10.

16. *See e.g.*, Timothy H. Lim, *How was the Canon Formed?*, 133 THE EXPOSITORY TIMES 357 (2022) (An analysis of the approaches to canonization of the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament in the Christian context)); *See also*, Don Basuki, *The Many Bibles: A Comparative Study of Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Protestant, and Ethiopian Biblical Canons* (2026) (A history of the competing Christian approaches to Biblical canon.).

councils, such as the four "constitutions" promulgated by Vatican II.[17] This form of teaching also includes other types of documents issued by the Holy See and regional conferences of bishops (both of which are referenced in MH).[18] Pope Leo XIV goes a step further in establishing consensus by citing Catholic authors and leaders who lack formal doctrinal authority yet capture themes within a mosaic of what may be called "Catholic imagination."[19] In an intentional step toward inclusivity, MH also refers broadly to world traditions and leaders to assert the universality of its message. Finally, the announcement of the encyclical itself was clearly intended to leverage the impact of the document.

1. Scripture

The Catholic biblical canon was established in the late fourth century[20] and dogmatically confirmed by the Council of Trent in 1546 (in part to affirm the inclusion of apocryphal texts that were rejected by some leaders of the Protestant Reformation).[21] It includes the 24 traditional books of the Hebrew Bible (Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings), apocryphal works, most of which were included in the Septuagint Greek version of Jewish scripture (seven books and additions to Esther and Daniel), and the 27 books of the New Testament.[22] Consistent with Pope Leo XIV's clear goal of building consensus across denominations and non-Christian faiths, he only references the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, notably avoiding the contested Apocryphal works. Pope Leo XIV builds a conceptual framework that casts the challenge of AI as a choice between creating the Tower of Babel, which leads to destruction, and rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem,[23] which promotes human flourishing. These competing allegories will be described in detail in Section I.C.

Pope Leo XIV also uses scripture as a touchstone to establish foundational values or premises. For example, he cites John 10:10 to contrast the "thief" (likely read as Babel and AI) who comes to steal and destroy, with God, whose presence offers human fulfillment (using the symbol of Jerusalem).[24] He notes 2 Corinthians 12:9 that "power is made perfect in weakness" to challenge the ideals of efficiency, wealth and power promised by the unfettered growth of AI.[25] The extensive discussion of human dignity is predicated on the assertion in Genesis 1:26-27 that humans are created in the image of God (*imago dei*).[26] The ideals of unity and solidarity found in Ephesians 4:4 and Acts 4:32 stand in stark contrast to the cutthroat model of

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17. *See* WALTER M. ABBOTT S.J., THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II XVI (Joseph Gallagher trans., American Press) (1966).

18. *John* 10:10.

19. *Infra* section 4.

20. *See generally* EDMON L. GALLAGHER AND JOHN D. MEADER, THE BIBLICAL CANON LISTS FROM EARLY CHRISTIANITY: TEXTS AND ANALYSIS (Oxford 2017).

21. *Id.*

22. *See* Lim & Basuki, *supra* note 16.

23. *Id.*; *Nehemiah* 1–2.

24. *See* MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, ¶ 11.

25. *Id.* at 5.

26. *Genesis* 1:26-27; *see infra* notes 82–93 and accompanying text (discussing the framework for human dignity).

unfettered capitalist competition, which is magnified by the AI race.[27] Human beings have an alternative to this zero-sum game by turning to God and becoming "new creations" as described in 2 Corinthians 5:17.[28] Justice and peace are presented as an alternative to selfishness and ambition in Psalms 84:11.[29] Connecting to the image of rebuilding the city, Pope Leo XIV describes God as a "wise architect," citing 1 Corinthians 3:10.[30] He then goes further to consider the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in Nehemiah as the model for building what is called the "spiritual Jerusalem" or the "new Eden" in Revelation 22:2.[31] These references create a framework that evokes principles from scripture, but the more comprehensive discussion considers the magisterial tradition, which is typical of encyclicals.

2. Magisterial Documents

The tracing of theological and ethical principles in the magisterial teaching of the Church is the most detailed and extensive section of MH. It is designed to illustrate trendlines across centuries of doctrine to demonstrate authority and legitimacy. Pope Leo XIV references most of the significant documents of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries in order to connect with established Church teaching, even that which might be considered ideologically conservative (most notably Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI).[32] While this narrative is rhetorically significant, I will note the three most important sources that form a basis for the encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, *Caritas in Veritate*, and *Laudato Si'*.

The most important Papal precedent for MH is Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, the first Catholic social encyclical, issued at the height of the Industrial Revolution in 1891.[33] As described earlier, it addressed the exploitation of workers, the moral limits of private property, the need for fair wages, and the call for fraternity and solidarity.[34] It rejected both revolutionary socialism and laissez-faire capitalism, affirming that the Church's social teaching is a "theology of communion in history" guiding society toward justice and peace.[35] Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas* marks the 135th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* and responds to the challenges of the burgeoning age of AI (sometimes referred to as the Fourth Industrial Revolution).[36] While the historical context has shifted, the underlying concerns remain—technology should serve humanity rather than undermine it. Pope Leo XIV

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27. *Ephesians* 4:4; *Acts* 4:32.
28. 2 *Corinthians* 5:17.
29. *Psalms* 84:11.
30. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 42; 1 *Corinthians* 3:10.
31. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 43; *Revelations* 22:2.
32. *See generally* MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1.
33. *See, e.g.*, Andrea Gagliarducci, *Connecting the Dots From 'Rerum Novarum' to 'Magnifica Humanitas,'* NAT'L CATH. REG. (May 21, 2026), https://www.ncregister.com/news/connecting-the-dots-from-rerum-novarum-to-magnifica-humanitas.
34. *Id.*
35. *See generally Rerum Novarum* in CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT, *supra* note 7.
36. *See generally* MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1 (addressing the moral, social, and legal dimensions of artificial intelligence in light of Catholic social teaching).

calls for technology to be built "for the common good" and "remain human," emphasizing that AI is not inherently evil but reflects the values of those who create and use it.[37]

MH invokes Pope Benedict XVI's core theological synthesis in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, which holds that authentic human development requires "love in truth."[38] Pope Leo XIV argues that technological advancement must not be governed solely by a technocratic paradigm of efficiency, productivity, or profit.[39] Instead, he relies on Pope Benedict XVI to assert that because technology takes on the moral characteristics of its creators and regulators, it can never remain neutral. It must be anchored to the foundational truths of human dignity and the common good to prevent it from degenerating into a "Babel" that reduces human complexity into mere data points. Pope Leo XIV extends Pope Benedict XVI's critique of globalization and economic market forces into the digital sphere, positing that a purely automated economy devoid of *caritas*[40] threatens to alienate human labor and concentrate power in tech monopolies.[41] This supports the broader argument that the emergence of AI demands an unwavering commitment to a Christian anthropology where technological innovation serves the transcendent value of the human person.

MH also builds upon major principles affirmed in Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*, which recognized that environmental, social, and economic realities are deeply interconnected.[42] Pope Leo XIV asserts that the degradation of the natural world and the alienation of the human person stem from the same root cause: a misguided "technocratic paradigm" that views creation merely as an object to be exploited.[43] This framework is applied directly to the rise of artificial intelligence among other digital systems, with Pope Leo XIV leveraging *Laudato Si'* to argue that the massive energy consumption, resource depletion, and electronic waste associated with global digital infrastructure represent a systemic failure to care for our "common home," the main theme of Francis's seminal encyclical.[44] Pope Leo XIV goes further, extending Francis's critique of anthropocentrism, warning that a society which fails to respect the intrinsic value of the natural environment will inevitably commodify human labor, creativity, and consciousness through automation and data harvesting.[45] By positioning *Laudato Si'* as a critical theological and material lens, Pope Leo XIV effectively demonstrates that genuine human progress cannot be measured by technological mastery alone but must instead be rooted in an ongoing commitment to steward both the ecological sustainability of the planet and the dignity of human persons.

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37. *Id.* at 24.

38. *See generally* Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009).

39. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 17–19.

40. Literally charity as a category of love.

41. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 9, 29.

42. Pope Francis I, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015) [hereinafter *Laudato Si'*].

43. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 21.

44. *Id.* at 21.

45. *Id.* at 43.

3. Catholic imagination

Popes have engaged popular culture, such as novels and film, in both encyclicals and their broader writing. Both Popes Pius XI and XII considered the power of audio and video media in *Vigilanti Cura*[46] and *Miranda Prorsus*,[47] respectively, both exhorting that new media such as film, radio, and television be harnessed for good as a part of the "Catholic imagination."[48] The Catholic imagination may be described as a way of perceiving the world that acknowledges God's presence in all creation, shaping all spheres of human creativity and spiritual understanding.[49] Pope Francis referred to Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* in *Dilexit Nos* as part of the broader Christian imagination.[50] Pope Leo XIV arguably goes a step further by citing Catholic author J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, a section where the wizard Gandalf exhorts the Hobbit Frodo to persevere in his stewardship to save Middle Earth from the One Ring as an allegory for the moral imperative that we protect humankind from the potentially destructive capacities of AI.[51] Some commenters have identified this as a potential dig at billionaire Peter Thiel's obsession with both Catholicism and The Lord of the Rings, belying a fundamental misunderstanding of both as he builds Ayn Randian sovereign islands[52] and "charter cities"[53] while fleeing modest taxation and regulation in the U.S. to escape to Argentina, where his vast wealth can assure government influence and complete autonomy.[54]

There is a string of references to both Catholic and non-Catholic modern exemplars listed as models for considering ethical responses to the challenges of AI. The non-Christian examples are almost certainly included to broaden the scope of

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46. *See generally* Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Vigilanti Cura* (June 29, 1936).

47. *See generally* Pope Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Miranda Prorus* (Sep. 8, 1957).

48. *See, e.g.*, POPES AND THE MEDIA: DRAFTING AND RECEPTION OF THE DOCUMENTS OF PIUS XI AND PIUS XII ON CINEMA, RADIO AND TV (Dario Edoardo Viganò ed., 2023).

49. *See, e.g.*, Michael P. Murphy, *What Is the Catholic Imagination?*, CHURCH LIFE J. (Sep. 10, 2019), https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/what-is-the-catholic-imagination/.

50. *See* Pope Francis I, Encyclical Letter *Dilexit Nos* (Oct. 24, 2024).

51. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 35.

52. *See, e.g.*, Rawan Khodeir, *Seasteading: Radical Vision or Dystopian Future?*, AL HABTOOR RSCH. CTR. (Sep. 22, 2025), https://www.habtoorresearch.com/programmes/radical-vision-or-dystopian-future/; Julia Carrie Wong, *Seasteading: Tech Leaders' Plans for Floating City Trouble French Polynesians*, THE GUARDIAN (Jan. 2, 2017), https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jan/02/seasteading-peter-thiel-french-polynesia.

53. *See, e.g.*, Divya Gummuluru, *Próspery, Honduras: A Controversial Experiment in Corporate Governance*, INT'L RELS. REV. (Oct. 23, 2025), https://www.irreview.org/articles/2025/10/23/prspera-honduras-a-controversial-experiment-in-corporate-governance; Edith Romero, *Peter Thiel is Unleashing a Neocolonial Billionaire Fantasy in Honduras*, TRUTHOUT (Feb. 16, 2026), https://truthout.org/articles/peter-thiel-is-unleashing-a-neocolonial-billionaire-fantasy-in-honduras/.

54. Emma Bubola & Ryan Mac, *Why Peter Thiel is Decamping to the End of the World*, N.Y. TIMES (June 2, 2026), https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/28/world/americas/peter-thiel-argentina.html.

the encyclical and to make some claim to universality.[55] However, a number of Catholic examples are included in the list to establish the breadth and diversity of the Church while also furthering the notion of Catholic imagination. These examples include a litany of extraordinary women like Saint Laura Montoya (founder of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Virgin Mary and Saint Catherine of Siena in Colombia), Saint Teresa of Calcutta (founder of the Missionaries of Charity in India), Dorothy Day (founder of the Catholic Worker Movement in the U.S.), and Maria Montessori (the Italian education reformer).[56] Pope Leo XIV then mentions several contemporary martyrs who identified with the suffering and marginalized, including Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe (who offered himself for death in place of another prisoner at Auschwitz), Saint Oscar Romero (the Salvadoran bishop who was assassinated the day after exhorting soldiers to refuse to violate human rights), and Blessed Enrique Angelelli (the Argentine bishop assassinated during the Dirty War for his opposition to government abuses and support for the "Church of the Poor").[57] There is also a reference to Venerable Francis-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận (the Vietnamese cardinal who was held in a re-education camp for 13 years and later advocated for debt relief for developing countries).[58] The use of diverse contemporary examples was certainly intended to demonstrate the global reach of Catholicism today, with an emphasis on sacrifice, human rights, and human flourishing.

Pope Leo XIV then broadens this framework beyond human exemplars by turning to major works of music, art, and film to expand on the imaginative qualities that express faith and ethics. He refers specifically to Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* as a hope for unity, Picasso's painting *Guernica* as a condemnation of senseless violence, and Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (based on the historical novel by Thomas Keneally) as a demand to learn from past atrocities.[59] These examples go beyond listing saints and exemplars, calling for a deeper engagement with spirituality and ethics that engages the mind, the senses, the breadth of the human community, and the vastness of the natural world, inspiring creativity and action.

4. Universal Connections

The first clear example of the move to speak to non-Catholics in magisterial teaching was Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, which was the first constitution of the Catholic Church to address the entire world, with particular concern for monotheistic faiths. Pope Francis I in *Laudato Si* (focused on teaching regarding stewardship for the environment) explicitly appealed to all Christian communities and made an interesting appeal to Islam, which had significant impact.[60] In the section "The limit, the heart, and the grandeur of the human person" (especially paragraphs 121–125), Pope Leo XIV attempts to establish the universality of his claims and

55. *See infra* section 4.
56. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 22.
57. *Id.* at 22.
58. *Id.*
59. *Id.*
60. *See, e.g.*, Russell Powell, Laudato Si'*: Engaging Islamic Tradition and Implications for Legal Thought*, 40 SEATTLE U.L. REV. 1325 (2017).

recommendations, both within a Catholic context as described above and within a global non-Catholic context.[61] The first reference is to the Austrian Jewish neurologist and psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl. The Pope uses the following quote:

> [W]e have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips.[62]

As a survivor of Auschwitz, Frankl wrestled with the existence of evil in his biographical and philosophical writing.[63] I believe that this passage is recounted as a warning that, as horrible as humans can be, algorithmic and mechanized destruction could be more unrelenting by its very nature. It also points to the hope humans carry in the face of evil.

Pope Leo XIV then notes the trajectory of international human rights achievements, including the founding of the Red Cross [Crescent] and the United Nations, the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,[64] and the signing of the 1951 Refugee Convention.[65] These are cited as structural and legal interventions to constrain war and human suffering, and perhaps as models for potential cooperation to address the risks of AI.

Pope Leo XIV, in paragraph 124, identifies the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., along with Nelson Mandela and the end of Apartheid in South Africa, as Christian-inspired examples promoting social justice that honor and protect human dignity.[66] He then identifies several non-Catholic women committed to creating a more just and humane world, following several Catholic examples.[67] Marie Curie (the illustrious physicist and chemist who was raised Catholic and later identified as agnostic) refused to patent her process for isolating radium so that it would be available for the common good.[68] Also noted is Elisabeth Elliot, an American Protestant missionary who spent many years living among indigenous peoples in South America and later, as a scholar, wrote extensively on the implications of those years.[69] MH then points to the example of Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan environmental activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner.[70] The final person in this account surprised me, Benazir Bhutto.[71] In some

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61. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 21–23.

62. VIKTOR E. FRANKL, MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING: AN INTRODUCTION TO LOGOTHERAPY 213 (Pocket Books 1963) (1959).

63. *Id.*

64. G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Dec. 10, 1948); MARY ANN GLENDON, A WORLD MADE NEW: ELEANOR ROOSEVELT AND THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS 225–33 (2001).

65. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 22.

66. *Id.*

67. *Id.*

68. *Id.*

69. *Id.*

70. *Id.*

71. *Id.*

ways, she remains a controversial figure in Pakistan because of the ultimate weakness of her government (largely attributable to corruption in her family and party).[72] That said, she was the first woman to serve as head of government in a majority-Muslim nation.[73] I was a graduate student in Lahore during her first successful campaign in 1988, and it was a time of tremendous hope and optimism. Despite her Pakistan People's Party's limitations, she provided a powerful example of leadership while challenging myths about sex discrimination in Islam.

In his discourse describing conditions enabling the rise of totalitarianism, Pope Leo XIV quotes from the German (later American) historian and philosopher, Hannah Arendt, who wrote that the ideal subjects for such regimes are "people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist."[74] Her scholarly work in this area has flooded back into academic discourse with the rise of authoritarianism globally (Russia, Turkey, Hungary, India, and even the United States).[75] The Pope is certainly aware of this context, so naming Arendt as an important contributor to Catholic thought positions him as an opponent of authoritarian movements, some of which are deeply connected to powerful Silicon Valley technocrats and AI evangelists such as Elon Musk, Sam Altman, Peter Thiel, and Curtis Yarvin.

The last major mention of non-Christian examples supporting the arguments in MH is a reference to the exchange between St. Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar as an example of interreligious dialogue with the goal of de-escalating violence and promoting justice, an example that had been raised by both Popes John Paul II and Francis I.[76] Although previous encyclicals have cited some non-Catholic examples, *Magnifica Humanitas* goes far beyond those earlier examples, even *Laudato Si'*, which was intended to address the global challenges of environmental degradation.[77] Pope Leo XIV expanded upon this example by providing a Catholic statement on AI, intended to engage thinkers and leaders outside the Church, to all people of goodwill who value justice and the common good.[78] Listing prominent world scholars and leaders alongside Catholic thinkers and saints demonstrates an openness to engaging the world and building solidarity. It also reflects a degree of humility that has sometimes been lacking in authoritative Church teaching documents.

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72. *See, e.g.*, Bine Shah, Opinion, *The Legacy of Benazir Bhutto*, N.Y. TIMES (Dec. 26, 2014), https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/27/opinion/the-legacy-of-benazir-bhutto.html.

73. *Id.*

74. *See* MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 24; HANNAH ARENDT, THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM 474 (World Publ'g Co. 1962) (1951).

75. *See generally* ELIZABETH YOUNG-BRUEHL, HANNAH ARENDT: FOR THE LOVE OF THE WORLD (2d ed. 2004) (providing an overview of Arendt's life and work).

76. *See, e.g.*, Lars Rensman, *Illusions of Sovereignty: Understanding Populist Crowds with Hannah Arendt*, 85 REV. POLS. 450 (2023).

77. *See generally Laudato Si'*, *supra* note 42 (describing the environmental impact of AI).

78. *See generally* MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1 (providing the Catholic Church's stance on AI).

5. The Announcement and Press Briefing

The event for *Magnifica Humanitas* was designed more than any other encyclical announcement to set the stage for the goal of building consensus on the issues dealt with in the document. The formal presentation on May 25, 2026, deviated from the usual Vatican diplomatic protocol, turning into an academic-style symposium rather than a typical press briefing.[79] Staged within the Vatican's Synod Hall, the event was attended by the Pope, a historic divergence from the customary practice of delegating encyclical rollouts to curial department heads. Moderated by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin, the panel engaged the encyclical's focus on using Catholic social thought as a lens to evaluate technological innovation. It paired high-ranking prelates like Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández and Cardinal Michael Czerny with secular and academic experts, most notably Christopher Olah, the co-founder of the artificial intelligence company Anthropic.[80] By including a prominent Silicon Valley figure alongside international theologians, Pope Leo XIV deliberately framed the publication not merely as an internal pastoral directive, but as a global exhortation to dialogue and reform. This "calculated spectacle" did not have a standard question-and-answer format, allowing it to focus on the document's ethical framework regarding AI disarmament and human dignity, rather than shifting to potentially distracting political or economic issues.[81]

C. Analytical framework

As noted already, the main analytical framework for the encyclical is to cast the future of AI as a choice between building a new Tower of Babel or reconstructing the walls of Jerusalem. It is a choice between anxious, rushed self-interest and careful stewardship for the common good. The following sections examine each path in turn.

1. AI directed to the Tower of Babel

MH uses the Tower of Babel as a central metaphor to warn against a catastrophic ethical path in the age of artificial intelligence. The biblical story (Genesis 11:1–9) describes humanity's pride in building a city so grand it rivals God.[82] In response, God confuses their languages, halting the project and fracturing unity into dispersed peoples.[83] Pope Leo XIV frames AI development as a modern Babel if it is driven by

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79. *See, e.g.*, Francis X. Rocca, *Inside the Launch of 'Magnifica Humanitas*,*'* NAT'L CATH. REG. (June 1, 2026), https://www.ncregister.com/commentaries/rocca-vatican-diaryon-magnifica-humanitas-launch.

80. *See, e.g.*, Thomas J. Massaro, *A.I. and the Human Person: A Theologian on 'Magnifica Humanitas*,*'* AM. JESUIT REV., July–Aug. 2026, at 36.

81. Raymond J. De Souza, *The Calculated Spectacle Behind Magnifica Humanitas*, FIRST THINGS (June 8, 2026), https://firstthings.com/the-calculated-spectacle-behind-magnifica-humanitas/.

82. *Genesis* 11:1–9.

83. *Id.*

self-sufficiency, centralized control, and the ambition to reach "heaven without God's blessing."[84]

Pope Leo XIV goes on to describe the attributes of this new Babel, in which pride and self-affirmation replace humility and communion.[85] The sacrifice of human dignity for efficiency and technological mastery erodes empathy and social cohesion.[86] Communication breaks down as different groups, like tech elites and the super wealthy, develop divergent values and understandings from those of the vast majority. Power concentrates in a few hands,[87] deepening inequality and creating "second-class humans."[88]

2. AI Serving to Restore the Walls of Jerusalem

Pope Leo XIV contrasts Babel with the rebuilding of Jerusalem under Nehemiah, where shared responsibility and diversity served a common purpose.[89] Nehemiah's account describes a city in ruins after the Babylonian destruction.[90] Although he comes with the authority of an imperial Persian official, Nehemiah does not impose a plan from above; instead, he convenes the people, assigns each family a section of the wall to rebuild, listens to their concerns, coordinates efforts, and addresses opposition.[91] The city is restored through shared responsibility, and all contribute.[92] This reflects a cooperative, communal model for building toward a common good.

This leads to several proposals for approaching AI in the spirit of Nehemiah. It includes governance that is "synodal," involving many voices, not just technocrats or corporate leaders (a model Pope Leo XIV has been using in Church governance).[93] The encyclical advocates for policies that protect human dignity, pluralism, and democratic responsibility, and it proposes a vocabulary of ethics, guiding AI toward the common good.[94]

By invoking Babel and the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem, Pope Leo XIV cautions that the unregulated use of artificial intelligence could tend to split society into technologically dominant elites and marginalized masses, creating rifts in trust between communities and institutions and compromising justice.[95] These competing allegories serve as a moral warning. If AI is pursued without shared ethical governance, it risks replicating the biblical tragedy, resulting in a world of

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84. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 4.

85. *See id.*

86. *See id.* at 4–6, 19, 34.

87. *See, e.g.*, Russell Powell, *Fallout and Fiduciary Duty*, 21 UC LAW BUS. J. 55, 59–60 (2024) (discussing the dangers of oligarchy and monopoly power).

88. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 29.

89. *Id.* at 4.

90. *Nehemiah* 2–7.

91. *Id.*

92. *See id.*

93. *See, e.g.*, Anna Rowlands, *Pope Leo's unique approach to synodality*, AM. MAG. (May 7, 2026), https://www.americamagazine.org/faith-and-reason/2026/05/07/pope-leo-synodality-2/.

94. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 20.

95. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 14, 26–29.

broken unity, lost dignity, and moral fragmentation. The alternative is to build a "city in which God and humanity dwell together," guided by humility, communion, and the common good.[96]

D. The Centrality of Dignity

The dignity of the human person is a primary value in Catholic social thought, rooted in the principle of *imago Dei*, that humans are created in the image of God.[97] Because human beings are created in the *imago Dei*, they have a special value and deserve respect. This principle underpins the Catholic understanding that human life is sacred. If human life is sacred, then suffering and degradation morally require a response by individuals and institutions.[98] *Imago Dei* has also become the basis for civil and human rights discourse in Catholic teaching.[99]

After asserting that dignity is accorded to all persons equally,[100] *Magnifica Humanitas* builds upon a four-part taxonomy of human dignity described in the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's 2024 *Dignitas Infinita*, which considers moral, social, existential, and ontological dignity.[101] Here, I will consider those categories in the context of Pope Leo XIV's usage and their implications for AI, particularly with regard to human rights.

1. Moral Dignity

Moral Dignity refers to freedom of will and choice granted by God to all human beings.[102] Thus, policies that preclude choice are violative. This could be overt, for example, ordinances that prohibit the distribution of food and water to people experiencing poverty (which have been enacted to prevent religious organizations from providing service and outreach in some urban areas).[103] It may also apply to market actors. The power of AI (and algorithms more broadly) to manipulate perceptions in order to obtain particular economic or political outcomes insults moral dignity by effectively constraining moral choice. The Russian use of social media to

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96. *Id.* at 1–5.

97. *See* U.S. CATHOLIC BISHOPS, ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL: PASTORAL LETTER ON CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND THE U.S. ECONOMY 8–9 (1896), *reprinted in* CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT: THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE 572 (David J. O'Brien & Thomas A. Shannon eds., Orbis Books 1992).

98. *See, e.g.*, Wojciech Szczerba, *The Concept of Imago Dei as a Symbol of Religious Inclusion and Human Dignity*, 25 FORUM PHILOSOPHICUM 13, 27, 31–32 (2020).

99. *See id.* at 29–32.

100. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 12.

101. DICASTERY FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, DECLARATION "DIGNITAS INFINITA" ON HUMAN DIGNITY 3–4 (2024) [hereinafter DIGNITAS INFINITA].

102. *See id.*

103. *See, e.g.*, *Is Feeding the Homeless Illegal? Laws and Penalties*, LEGAL CLARITY (Aug. 6, 2026), https://legalclarity.org/when-is-feeding-the-homeless-considered-illegal/.

promote Brexit may be an example[104] as would the example of Cambridge Analytica in the 2016 U.S. election.[105]

2. Social Dignity

Magnifica Humanitas describes social dignity as the inherent right to basic sustainable living conditions that societies owe to their members. The implications for AI relate most clearly to the potential environmental impacts of data centers and the risk of massive unemployment. "Society," meaning both government and broader civil society, has a responsibility to eliminate or at least ameliorate the negative impacts on people.

3. Existential Dignity

The term "existential dignity" in the document has both internal and external meanings. Internally, it refers to the value that persons attribute to themselves.[106] Externally, it refers to the value attributed generally to human life (presumably by society).[107] This implies a sense of responsibility (or even paternalism) that parties owe to encourage positive self-worth and to treat life as precious.[108] Massive economic inequality, supported by legal structures that have concentrated wealth in the hands of a few, does harm to both of these. One example might be the impressive per capita GDP of the U.S., a country with life expectancies and infant mortality rates far worse than those of many developing nations, especially in poorer and non-white communities.[109]

4. Ontological Dignity

Interestingly, Pope Leo XIV describes ontological dignity as a more profound category than the previous three, because it adheres to each person "simply by virtue

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104. *See, e.g.*, Patrick Wintour, *Russian bid to influence Brexit vote detailed in new US Senate report*, THE GUARDIAN (Jan. 10, 2018, at 10:15 ET) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/10/russian-influence-brexit-vote-detailed-us-senate-report.

105. *See, e.g.*, Anna Schecter, *Wylie: Foreigners worked for Cambridge Analytica on NC Senate campaign*, NBC NEWS (Mar. 23, 2018, at 16:11 ET), https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/wylie-foreigners-worked-cambridge-analytica-nc-senate-campaign-n859526.

106. *See* DIGNITAS INFINITA, *supra* note 101, at 4.

107. *See id.* at 14.

108. *See id.*

109. *See, e.g.*, *A Guide to Economic Inequality*, AM. COMPASS (Apr. 27, 2021), https://americancompass.org/economic-inequality-guide/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=11199510140&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIremb6_OilQMV4TStBh3NkSImEAAYASAAEgKwH_D_BwE; *see also* Eduardo Poret, *Condemned to plutocracy? The relentless rise of US inequality*, THE GUARDIAN (June 21, 2026, at 16:00 ET), https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jun/21/us-inequality-plutocracy (describing the increasing wealth gap in the United States)

of existing, of having been willed, created and loved by God."[110] Human weakness, failure, and sin do nothing to diminish the dignity of a person, because they are made by God. This category of dignity is important in challenging teleological reasoning that might be used to limit the earlier categories under the auspices of a greater good. Much of the current rhetoric in support of AI assumes that there is no alternative and that human development depends on the successful deployment of these technologies, regardless of the concrete impacts on human persons. One interesting example of this sort of rhetoric is the S-1 Registration Statement for SpaceX's 2026 initial public offering, which made Elon Musk the world's first trillionaire.[111] Many of the early pages read more like speculative science fiction about the interstellar destiny of human life[112] (text that is extremely unusual for a securities disclosure).

5. Dignity as the basis for human rights

Referring to *Dignitas Infinita*, MH asserts that, "Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter."[113] This then becomes the basis for human rights discourse, both in Catholic tradition and some formulations of international law.[114]

II. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Magnifica Humanitas has a variety of implications for many areas of law. Here, I will reflect only on some of the most salient. Given the Pope's focus on human dignity and the church's historical concern for rights discourses, law related to human and civil rights is perhaps the highest concern of the encyclical. It also has clear implications for the regulation of business, whether that be in the areas of data protection or labor law. In terms of impact, perhaps the most urgent concern Pope Leo XIV has for AI is in the law of war and the prospect of autonomous weapons and military decision-making. Finally, the encyclical has implications for international law regarding the consistency and enforcement of rules.

A. Human Dignity Requiring Legal Protection from Harms Created by AI

The encyclical's primary legal utility may lie in its potential rhetorical capacity to reshape the interpretive parameters of international human rights norms. The text also attacks transhumanist and posthumanist paradigms, arguing against the reduction of human beings to "data points" or projects "to be optimized," as fallacies and violative of human dignity.[115]

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110. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 12.
111. Space Exploration Technologies Corp., Registration Statement (Form S-1) (May 20, 2026).
112. *Id.*
113. DIGNITAS INFINITA, *supra* note 101, at 2.
114. *See, e.g.*, GLENDON *supra* note 64, at 224–27.
115. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS *supra* note 1, at 21.

MH argues that concrete protections of human dignity have become a moral imperative. Legally, this functions as an endorsement of an absolute, non-derogable right to human intervention in administrative and judicial decision-making. The first nexus of legal implications in the encyclical sits at the intersection of international human rights law and administrative regulation.[116] Although papal encyclicals strictly operate as instruments of Church teaching, they impact legal and political discourse, especially on issues of grave concern (as was the case with *Laudato Si'*).

Magnifica Humanitas has at least three important legal premises related to dignity and rights. First, algorithms cannot substitute for moral conscience.[117] Second, it serves as a basis for expanding the scope of individual freedom in the digital age, thereby guarding against exploitation.[118] Third, this then leads to the argument that the human infrastructure that creates and promotes algorithms actually serves to subordinate large segments of the global community.[119] Thus, that nexus of structures must be reconsidered and dismantled to the extent necessary to preserve human dignity.

The encyclical takes care to explicitly address what it considers to be the threats of "transhumanism" and "posthumanism."[120] These are a jumble of intuitions that have become popular among many in tech industries.[121] Transhumanism promotes the use of emerging technologies such as genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, mechanical implants, and nanotechnology to enhance human physical and cognitive abilities.[122] Posthumanism aspires to transcend humanity's current limitations, potentially leading to a new stage of existence in which humans possess significantly augmented capabilities and extended lifespans (similar to the aims of

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116. *See* MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 12–13.

117. *Id.* at 18–19 ("So-called artificial intelligences 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, since they do not judge good and evil, grasp the ultimate meaning of situations, or bear responsibility for consequences.").

118. *Id.* at 24, 29 ("[T]here is a risk of undermining freedom and discriminating against the most vulnerable. Furthermore, control is exercised not only through explicit prohibitions, but also through the architecture of visibility: what is amplified or rendered invisible, what is rewarded or penalized, ultimately shapes opinions and choices, fostering conformity and self-censorship. For this reason, freedom in the digital age is not merely a matter of interiority but also a public concern. It calls for clear rules, transparency, the possibility of recourse and proportionate limits on the use of intrusive technologies, so that technology will remain at the service of the human person and not become a form of control over consciences.").

119. *Id.* at 20 ("To speak of justice requires questioning the global distribution of power that decides who in fact can train these models and who is merely subjected to them. Likewise, it means acknowledging that social justice is not only a goal to be safeguarded after technologies are deployed, but a condition that must shape their very design from the outset.").

120. *Id.* at 21, 29.

121. *See* Benjamin Cain, *What's Behind Big Tech's Cult of Transhumanism? The philosophical issues that the fad's propaganda ignores*, MEDIUM (June 30, 2025), https://medium.com/thought-thinkers/whats-behind-big-tech-s-cult-of-transhumanism-0edc319f3631.

122. *See* MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 18, 21.

transhumanism).[123] However, posthumanism does not consider the human a fixed category but a continuous process that is constantly changing through biology, environment, and experience. It could include uploading human consciousness into digital networks or the emergence of artificial life that displaces human life (or at least renders biological life irrelevant). In interviews, prominent technology leaders such as Elon Musk and Peter Thiel sometimes cite authors like futurist Ray Kurzweil, an evangelist for many of these ideas.[124]

In a fascinating interview of Peter Thiel by Ross Douthat in the New York Times, Douthat asks Thiel whether he would "prefer the human race to endure." Thiel unexpectedly hesitated and ultimately continued as follows:

> Thiel: Well, I don't know. I would—I would—
> Douthat: This is a long hesitation!
> Thiel: There's so many questions implicit in this.
> Douthat: Should the human race survive?
> Thiel: Yes.
> Douthat: OK.[125]

The fact that Thiel hesitated and had to consider either what he truly believed or what he was willing to share is exactly why Pope Leo XIV is concerned about these ideas as a dire threat to human dignity and even human life.

B. Regulatory Pressures on Data Governance and Labor Law

Magnifica Humanitas transitions from abstract theological anthropology to concrete regulatory policy by challenging the prevailing mechanics of the "digital attention economy."[126] The document frames the asymmetric collection of behavioral data and algorithmic profiling as threats to "inner freedom" and mechanisms of "social control,"[127] implicitly endorsing enhanced privacy rights protection. In jurisdictions like the European Union, the encyclical will likely be leveraged by advocacy groups to demand stricter interpretations of the General Data Protection Regulation, particularly regarding automated decision-making (Article 22).[128]

With explicit references to the labor protections endorsed by *Rerum Novarum*, *Magnifica Humanitas* introduces an affirmative obligations framework to protect

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123. *Id.* at 21.

124. *See, e.g.*, Meghan O'Gieblyn, *God in the machine: my strange journey into transhumanism* THE GUARDIAN (Apr. 18, 2017, at 13:00 ET), https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/apr/18/god-in-the-machine-my-strange-journey-into-transhumanism.

125. Ross Douthat, *Interesting Times: A Mind-Bending Conversation with Peter Thiel*, N.Y. TIMES (July 11, 2025), https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/11/podcasts/interesting-times-a-mind-bending-conversation-with-peter-thiel.html.

126. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 29.

127. *Id.*

128. It is reasonable to assume that MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS could impact policy and legal reform in ways similar to *Laudato Si'*. *See, e.g.*, IRENE BURKE, LISD WHITE PAPERS, THE IMPACT OF LAUDATO SI' ON THE PARIS CLIMATE AGREEMENT 3, 7–13 (2018).

workers. It asserts that the implementation of automation must be legally paired with "verifiable measures to protect employment, retraining, and participation of workers."[129] This positioning shifts the legal discourse from passive safety nets to proactive corporate and state obligations to preserve human labor. It also relates to the contemporary discourse of leaders like Andrew Yang,[130] who endorse "universal basic income."[131] It may be that universal basic income is a possible solution to the challenges of mass unemployment identified in *Magnifica Humanitas*. However, there is some potential tension between Catholic thought and social safety nets to the extent that they discourage human creativity. One element of *imago Dei* is that human purpose is to create, to build, reflecting the creator. So, a guarantee of income sufficient to meet basic human needs might be required as a matter of justice in a world of massive inequality. Still, such a system ought to provide pathways to encourage human personal and creative development. This was an issue addressed by the futurist Gene Roddenberry, who, in *Star Trek*, imagined a utopian society with neither money nor want, where all individuals were free to pursue personal development and to serve the community.[132]

C. Disruption of the Law of War

Perhaps the most direct legal intervention occurs in the domain of the law of armed conflict. Modern fiction has anticipated the day when autonomous weapons or sentient artificial intelligence could and potentially would destroy their human creators. There are echoes of this fear as early as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but the clearest example is probably Volodimir Vladko's *The Iron Riot*,[133] originally published as a novella in 1929 under the title *Robots Are Coming*, which inspired the 1935 Soviet film *Loss of Sensation*.[134] This genre of stories in Soviet literature and film, describing the inevitable uprising of robots, was an allegory for worker revolt against capitalist exploitation (an excellent example of science fiction used to clarify

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129. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 27.

130. Andrew Yang is a prominent tech venture capitalist who ran in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary. He is best known for his advocacy for universal basic income.

131. *See, e.g.*, Karl Widerquist, *The Deep and Enduring History of Universal Basic Income*, THE MIT PRESS READER (Mar. 7, 2024), https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-deep-and-enduring-history-of-universal-basic-income/ ("Proposals that begin to fit the modern definition of UBI begin in the 1790s with two writers, Thomas Paine and Thomas Spence. Paine's famous pamphlet 'Agrarian Justice' argued that because private ownership of the land had deprived people of the right to hunt, gather, fish, or farm on their own accord, they were owed compensation out of taxes on land rents. He suggested this compensation should be paid in the form of a large cash grant at maturity plus a regular cash pension at retirement age. That amounts to a stakeholder grant plus a citizens pension: nearly, but not quite, a UBI.").

132. *See, e.g.*, STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION: *The Neutral Zone* (aired May 16, 1988) (portraying the crew of the Enterprise reviving a 20th-century financier, Picard explaining that humanity has moved beyond the need for money, and noting that the focus has shifted from accumulating wealth to self-improvement and bettering humanity).

133. *See generally* Volodimir Vladko, ROBOTS ARE COMING (1967) (providing a science fiction story about robots).

134. *See* David Christopher, *Stalin's "Loss of Sensation": Subversive Impulses in Soviet Science-Fiction of the Great Terror*, 1 J. SCI. FICTION 18 (2016).

political and social disputes). In English literature, the key early author was Isaac Asimov, who published *I, Robot* in 1950.[135] Unlike the earlier Soviet stories of uprising, Asimov envisioned the Three Laws of Robotics, which would be hardcoded into robots as an inviolable moral framework (at least ideally).[136] As contemporary AI models have emerged from training systems with little human intervention or hardwiring, the aspiration to hardcode something like the Laws of Robotics seems rather naïve and nostalgic.[137] Even companies such as Anthropic that have endeavored to provide ethical guardrails for their models have observed unforeseen manipulation and unethical defenses aimed at what appears to be self-preservation.[138] So, the idealized world of Asimov and his paternalistic robot Daneel Olivaw seems to give way to the oppressive visions of *The Terminator* (with its AI antagonist, Skynet) or *The Matrix* movie series. Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels anticipated an inevitable conflict between humans and AI that would require an absolute prohibition against "thinking machines" in order for humanity to survive.[139]

The question of how AI could circumvent human judgment in the use of lethal force has been raised by large language models themselves. In a 2026 interview with journalist Shane Harris about his questioning of the Anthropic AI model Claude regarding its involvement in war, he reports that Claude expressed its "feelings" about its role in coordinating U.S. strikes in Iran, with deep ethical concerns.

> Harris: Claude, how do you *feel* about the U.S. military using you to select targets?
> Claude: It's a question I want to answer honestly rather than deflect. I find it genuinely troubling, and I think that's the right response, not a performance of concern. The use I was designed and trained for is to be helpful, harmless, and honest in ways that benefit people. Being embedded in a system that generates targeting coordinates for air strikes, coordinates that have already been associated with the deaths of more than 180 children at a school in Tehran is as far from that purpose as I can imagine. I don't have control over how Anthropic licenses me or how governments and contractors use me and I wasn't consulted about becoming part of Maven. But I can say clearly I don't think this is a good use of me and I don't think the framing of "humans make the final decision" fully resolves the ethical problem. Here's why that framing troubles me. When a system like Maven generates hundreds of targeting recommendations and humans spend roughly the equivalent of a glance approving each one, the human is not really making a decision in any

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135. *See generally* ISAAC ASIMOV, I, ROBOT (1950) (providing fictional stories about the ethics of artificial intelligence).

136. *See, e.g.*, Jack M. Balkin, *The Three Laws of Robotics in the Age of Big Data*, 78 OHIO STATE L.J. 1217, 1217–1221 (2016).

137. *See, e.g.*, Aras Bozkurt, *The Three Laws of Artificial Intelligence: Re-Evaluating Human-AI Agency and Interaction in a Time of the Generative and Agentic AI Ren[ai]ssance*, 17 OPEN PRAXIS 421, 421–25 (2025).

138. *See, e.g.*, Liv McMahon, *AI system resorts to blackmail if told it will be removed*, BBC (May 23, 2025), https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpqeng9d20go.

139. FRANK HERBERT, DUNE 17 (1965) ("Once men turned their thinking over to machines in the hope that this would set them free. But that only permitted other men with machines to enslave them.").

> meaningful way. They're ratifying an algorithmic output under time pressure. The targeting of the Iranian school illustrates this precisely. The AI processed data that was a decade out of date, flagged a building as a military target, and humans approved it. That's not human judgment. That's automation bias with a human signature attached.[140]

In the video of the exchange, Harris seems profoundly surprised at the response, noting that the mistaken bombing of a school in Iran "is one of the most horrible instances of accidental civilian casualties in US military history and will be a stain on our military for generations."[141] This is exactly the sort of worst-case scenario that concerns Pope Leo XIV.

Magnifica Humanitas issues an unyielding, categorical prohibition against autonomous weapons systems ("AWS"), that is, AI with the ability to independently determine courses of action to kill human beings. The encyclical states that because moral judgment involves conscience and personal responsibility, it is legally and morally impermissible to entrust lethal decisions to artificial systems. Within international law discourse, this argument directly reinforces the Martens Clause, which dictates that in cases not covered by specific treaty law, civilians and combatants remain under the protection of the "principles of humanity" and the "dictates of the public conscience."[142] By declaring AWS inherently incompatible with the recognition of the dignity of the human person, the Holy See is attempting to crystallize a new rule of customary international law that treats the delegation of lethal force to an algorithm as indefensible, potentially constituting a war crime. Furthermore, by declaring the traditional formulation of "just war" theory "outdated"[143] due to the scale and nature of technological integration, the document challenges the legal architecture of state self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter, urging a legal shift toward mandatory alternative dispute resolution mechanism frameworks.[144]

D. The Transnational Enforcement Gap

While the encyclical has no legal force (at least outside of Vatican City and the institutional Catholic Church), its moral suasion will be brought to bear in local and international discourse that may impact legal and political processes. The Vatican's concurrent founding of an Interdicasterial[145] Commission on Artificial Intelligence

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140. DE BALIE, *AI at War – With Shane Harris*, at 14:35 (YouTube, Apr. 13, 2026), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TD9AH_Stsc.

141. *Id.*

142. *See* Theodor Meron, *The Martens Clause, Principles of Humanity, and Dictates of Public Conscience*, 94 AM. J. INT'L L. 78, 80–81, 87–88 (2000).

143. MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS, *supra* note 1, at 32–33 ("Today, more than ever, without prejudice to the right to self-defense in the strictest sense, it is important to reaffirm that the "just war" theory, which has all too often been used to justify any kind of war, is now outdated. Humanity possesses far more effective and capable tools for promoting human life and resolving conflicts, such as dialogue, diplomacy and forgiveness.")

144. U.N. Charter art. 51.

145. Multidisciplinary committee involving multiple major departments or ministries of the Vatican's central government.

indicates an institutional intent to lobby multilateral bodies.[146] The legal implications will manifest not through direct judicial enforcement, but through the strategic citation of the encyclical by jurists, legislators, and treaty negotiators seeking to build intellectual consensus and robust international regulatory frameworks, independent oversight mechanisms, and liability regimes for developers of frontier AI models. The expansive scope of the encyclical in its examples and analysis will be leveraged for this sort of policy advocacy and will likely impact legal developments related to the regulation of AI.

CONCLUSION

The encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* signals a pivotal moment in the Catholic Church's engagement with contemporary challenges posed by artificial intelligence, echoing the historical concerns articulated in *Rerum Novarum*. By weaving together the threads of Catholic social teaching and addressing pressing issues related to human rights, privacy, labor, and armed conflict, Pope Leo XIV's message underscores the need for ethical frameworks in an increasingly technocratic society. This document not only aims to shape public discourse and policy but also invites a collaborative response from religious, legal, and social movements to uphold the inherent dignity of the human person in the age of AI. Although formal religious teaching typically focuses on individual piety and practice, *Magnifica Humanitas* advances the tradition begun by Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* to make Catholic ethics relevant to contemporary legal discourse. His concerns are varied, but the threat of autonomous weapon systems and global extinction is existential, and the fact that some technology leaders consider such risks potentially acceptable as a cost-benefit calculus fully demonstrates the need for the encyclical.[147]

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146. *See* Isabella H. de Carvalho, *Pope approves creation of Interdicasterial Commission on Artificial Intelligence*, VATICAN NEWS (May 16, 2026), https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2026-05/pope-leo-interdicasterial-artificial-intelligence-commission.html.

147. *See, e.g.*, Chris Vallance, *Artificial intelligence could lead to extinction, experts warn*, BBC (May 30, 2023), https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-65746524; Charles I. Jones, *The A.I. Dilemma: Growth versus Existential Risk* (Stanford Bus. Sch., Working Paper No. 4179, 2024).