AN OVERVIEW OF POPE LEO'S FIRST ENCYCLICAL

Nb On Tuesday 23 June at 7.30pm in St John's Hall, Fr Shaiju will be offering a presentation in our parishes on its significance

Pope Leo's first encyclical tackles A.I., power and human dignity

by Gerard O'Connell

Pope Leo XIV greets Anthropic co-founder Christopher Olah during the presentation of the pope's first encyclical, "Magnifica humanitas: On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence," at the Vatican on May 25.

Pope Leo XIV has written a powerful, challenging and inspiring encyclical letter "on safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence" that is sure to spark discussion. This is so not only because of his call to "disarm AI" but especially because of what he has to say in Chapter Five about "the culture of power" in today's world that includes a challenge to those conducting wars and to the military-industrial complexes that profit from arms.

In "Magnifica Humanitas" ("Magnificent Humanity"), he reflects on what is happening to humanity and planet earth in this new era of human history as a result of the development of the new technologies of digitalization, artificial intelligence and robotics that "are transforming our world." He asks: Where is all this heading?

Pope Leo signed the encyclical on May 15, the 135th anniversary of the encyclical "Rerum Novarum," promulgated by Pope Leo XIII, that is considered the beginning of the modern social doctrine of the Catholic Church. With his first encyclical, Leo emerges clearly as a pope of social justice.

The Vatican released the 42,000-word text in Italian, English and other languages at 11:30 on 25 May in Rome, with Leo making history by becoming the first pope to present his own encyclical. He did so in the Vatican's new synod hall. He was assisted by a panel of three cardinals—Pietro Parolin, Víctor Manuel Fernández and Michael Czerny—as well as Christopher Olah, a co-founder of the artificial intelligence company Anthropic, and two women theologians, Anna Rowlands from Durham University in England and Léocadie Lushombo from the Jesuit school of theology in Santa Clara University in California.

"Humanity, created by God in all its grandeur, is today facing a pivotal choice: either to construct a new Tower of Babel or to build the city in which God and humanity dwell together," Leo writes in the introduction to the encyclical, in which he frames the conversation around two biblical images: the tower of Babel and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

He recalls that the Tower of Babel was "a project conceived without reference to God, supported by a uniformity that eliminated diversity and that chose homogenization over communion." But the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, described in the Book of Nehemiah, "shows how the city is reborn…through the shared responsibility of all. It is an undertaking with God at the centre, which rebuilds relationships before rebuilding with stones."

Pope Leo sees humanity today at a historic crossroads, symbolized by those two images, and writes, "Each generation inherits the task of shaping its own era, of guiding history to become a place where the dignity of every person is safeguarded, justice is promoted and fraternity is made possible."

"Yet," he writes, "every era also runs the risk of creating an inhumane and more unjust world," and "we must ask God for the wisdom to interpret the great trends of our time, particularly technological advances."

He emphasizes that "technology should not be considered, in itself, as a force antagonistic to humanity," saying that it "has significantly improved the living conditions of humanity." At the same time, he adds, "each phase of progress has also revealed the ambiguity of tools that can cause harm when not oriented toward the good."

He writes, "We must avoid the 'Babel syndrome,' namely the idolatry of profit that sacrifices the weak, a uniformity that neutralizes differences, and the pretence that a single language—even a digital one—can translate everything, including the mystery of the person, into data and performance." He argues instead, "let us choose the 'way of Nehemiah,' which highlights the importance of working together to make the City of God a safe place for returning exiles." In his talk in the synod hall, he noted the presence of Mr. Olah as an example of working together for the good of humanity.

Today, he writes in the encyclical, "we find ourselves facing a new situation. The power and prevalence of emerging technologies are interwoven into the fabric of daily life, shaping decision-making processes." He quotes Pope Francis: "Never has humanity had such power over itself."

Indeed, Leo frequently quotes Pope Francis in the encyclical and is clearly developing his social teaching. He recalls that "Pope Francis warned, we must realistically ask ourselves who holds this power today and how they use it." In the past, Leo writes, "it was largely up to the State to guide and direct innovation. Today, however, the main drivers of development are private, often transnational, parties…which makes it even more challenging to discern, govern and direct such power toward the common good." In addition to the introduction, which sets the tone for the whole discussion, the encyclical consists of five chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter 1: 'A Dynamic Approach Faithful to the Gospel'

The first chapter summarizes "how the Social Doctrine of the Church has taken shape in the recent Papal Magisterium and in the Second Vatican Council." It presents artificial intelligence "as a development that challenges the categories of Social Doctrine from within, calling for their further development in fidelity to the Gospel."

It clarifies "some fundamental principles concerning the way in which the church exists in history and relates to the world" while "recognizing the autonomy of earthly realities and the distinction between ecclesial and political communities."

Leo makes clear that "the church does not claim to assume the functions belonging to the State." At the same time, he writes, "when the dignity of our brothers and sisters is violated, when politics fails to address the tragedies of humanity, when the economy turns against the person or science oversteps the limits of its competence, the Church—together with other Christian denominations and believers of other religions—must make her voice heard, not in order to dominate, but to promote communion."

He explains that it does so through the "Social Doctrine of the Church," which is "the fruit of receiving and structuring a long tradition of ecclesial reflection on life in society, rooted in Sacred Scripture, the Church Fathers and the theological and legal developments of the Middle Ages and modern era," and which "began to take shape as an organic *corpus* of social teaching with Leo XIII's Encyclical 'Rerum Novarum'" in 1891.

Chapter 2: 'Foundations and Principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church"

In the second chapter, Leo highlights "the foundations and principles of the social doctrine of the church" which "will help us to interpret the 'new things' of our time" and "to protect the human person in the age of artificial intelligence."

He mentions five principles: “the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity and social justice.”

“At the heart of the Christian understanding of the human person lies the great biblical affirmation that men and women are created in the image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27) of the Triune God,” he writes. He emphasizes that every human being has dignity “simply by virtue of existing, of having been willed, created and loved by God.”

He recalls that John Paul II stated that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948, remains one of the highest expressions of the human conscience: “From the Christian perspective, human rights are not an external addition to the person, but an expression of intrinsic human dignity, which the international community is called to protect and promote.”

Leo emphasizes that “there is still a long way to go to ensure that the rights of a great many, namely women, are equally and genuinely guaranteed throughout the world.”

In the light of the fact that “every man and woman possesses an inalienable dignity, together with rights that no human power can betray or nullify,” he writes, we are required “to shape the way we live together, including our economic and political choices.” And “from this arises the first major principle of Social Doctrine: the common good.”

Leo writes that “the universal destination of goods” is particularly important today. It reminds us that “the earth’s goods are given by God to the entire human family to sustain the lives of all,” and “it is not in accordance with God’s plan to use this gift in such a way that its benefits accrue solely to a select few.”

He recalls that “the Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable.” Today, he writes, “among the goods that are universally intended for everyone, we must also include new forms of property, such as patents, algorithms, digital platforms, technological infrastructure and data.”

Furthermore, he writes, “care for our common home and our responsibility toward the poor and future generations require that the use of the goods of creation and the new possibilities offered by technology be regulated in such a way as to respect the environment, avoid waste and prevent new forms of exploitation.”

Leo then points to the third principle, subsidiarity, according to which “the role of individuals, families, local communities and intermediary organizations should not be supplanted by higher-level authorities. He writes, “The principle of subsidiarity applies especially in the context of the digital revolution. Here, the highest level is not the State, but rather major economic and technological actors that exercise *de facto* power over the conditions of everyday life.” He adds that the principle of subsidiarity requires that such processes “be directed toward the common good with transparency, accountability and meaningful forms of participation.” In this context, he writes, “States and transnational institutions are called to ensure fair rules and effective safeguards.”

Turning to the fourth principle, solidarity, Leo writes, “solidarity is the concrete recognition that the future of each individual is connected to the future of all; indeed, ‘no one is saved alone’.” Today, “Solidarity demands that decisions regarding data, algorithms, platforms and artificial intelligence take into account not only the immediate benefit for a few, but also the impact on all peoples and on future generations.”

Leo lists “social justice” as the fifth principle and writes, “for the Christian community, social justice is a concrete way of following Jesus and remaining faithful to the Gospel.” He adds, “A litmus test for social justice today is the treatment of migrants, refugees and those forced to move due to poverty, violence, climate change and environmental disasters.”

Chapter 3: ‘Technology and Dominance, The Grandeur of Humanity in Light of the Promises of AI’

Leo recalls that Pope Francis, in his encyclical “Laudato Si’,” denounced “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.” He adds, “This paradigm has spread rapidly in recent years, fuelled in part by the expansion of artificial intelligence, cognitive science, nanotechnology, robotics and biotechnology.”

The pope further writes that “Faced with this concentration of power in the digital world, the criteria for judgment and discernment in this new situation are the noble principles of Social Doctrine: the inalienable dignity of the human person, the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity and social justice.”

While “It is not possible to provide a single, comprehensive definition of AI,” Leo writes, “We must avoid the misconception of equating this type of ‘intelligence’ with that of human beings. These systems merely imitate certain functions of human intelligence.”

In society, he writes, A.I. “is now embedded in decision-making processes across many sectors and at multiple levels: in communication, management and control.” But, he emphasizes, “the use of AI is never a purely technical matter: when it enters processes that affect people’s lives, it touches on rights, opportunities, status and freedom.” He notes that “Important and sensitive decisions risk being fully delegated to automated systems that do not know compassion, mercy, forgiveness,” and so “can give rise to new forms of exclusion.”

Indeed, he writes, “entrusting an algorithm in practice with the power to select who is worthy or not, without anyone bearing responsibility for that judgment, is to hand over the task of redefining the boundaries of human possibilities.”

Given this, Leo says, “we cannot consider AI to be morally neutral.” Ethical discernment must examine how that system is designed and what vision of the human person and society is embedded in the data and models that guide it.

“For AI to respect human dignity and truly serve the common good,” Leo says, “responsibility must be clearly defined at every stage” as well as “the possibility of identifying who must “account” for decisions.” He calls for “robust legal frameworks, independent oversight, informed users and a political system that does not abdicate its responsibility.”

In the encyclical and in his presentation in the synod hall, Pope Leo called for “disarming AI,” which “means freeing it from the mentality of ‘armed’ competition, which today is not limited simply to the military context, but is also an economic and cognitive phenomenon. This entails a race for ever more powerful algorithms and larger datasets, driven by the desire to secure geopolitical or commercial dominance.”

He added, “To disarm means discrediting the assumption that technical power automatically confers the right to govern.”

He insists, however, that “To disarm does not mean rejecting technology but preventing it from dominating humanity. It means freeing technology from monopolistic control and opening it to discussion and debate.”

He goes onto assert that we must “safeguard humanity” from “the pervasive technocratic paradigm in which we are immersed, and that is amplified by the digital revolution and AI, and threatens to normalize an anti-human vision” in which “the fullness of life is equated with having more, reducing weakness, eliminating uncertainty and exerting total control.” He sees this “inhuman vision” in certain ways of thinking such as “transhumanism” and “posthumanism.” He critiques these views and says, “the key issue is not the use of technology as such, but the vision that underlies it. If the human being is treated as something to be perfected or surpassed, it becomes easier to accept that some lives are less useful, less desirable or less worthy.”

Leo here notes that “our relationship with life seems to be in crisis today. Everything that appears as a ‘limit’—incapacity, illness, old age, suffering, vulnerability—tends to be seen primarily as a defect to be corrected, rather than as a reality through which our humanity matures and opens itself to relationship. And yet we must remember that humanity flourishes not *despite* limitations, but often *through* them.” Indeed, he says, “To eliminate suffering entirely would mean, in the end, extinguishing love and desire as well” and “the richness of our humanity.”

Chapter 4: ‘Safeguarding Humanity at a Time of Transformation: Truth, Work, Freedom’

Leo writes, “the digital transformation invites us to rediscover truth as a common good, to protect the dignity of work and to safeguard freedom against all forms of dependence and commercialization.”

With respect to “truth and democracy,” he writes, “The use of digital platforms and AI systems is driving profound changes in public and political communication. Tools that could foster dialogue and participation are often used to construct distorted narratives and blur the boundaries between truth and falsehood, mixing facts with opinions. Disinformation did not begin with AI, yet today it finds a powerful amplifier in AI.”

Leo describes the search for truth as “an essential element of democracy, which is itself a means of contributing to the common good,” adding that “indifference to the truth leads, slowly but surely, to a descent into totalitarianism.”

He calls for promoting "an ecology of communication" to establish norms for decision making around content and personal data, and says doing so would require "serious journalism and forums for debate."

Turning to the dignity of work, Leo writes that since "Rerum Novarum," "the Church has emphasized the protection of workers and the need to combat all forms of exploitation" and "has recognized in work "the essential key" to understanding the entire social question."

In this fourth industrial revolution, he says, "the convergence of automation, robotics and AI is rapidly transforming the very structure of work," and "the 'new ways' of working are not necessarily better." Hence, "it is necessary to design systems that are centred on the human person and not solely on performance."

More than ever "in the age of AI and robotics," he says, "it is no longer possible to rely solely on the 'invisible hand' of the market." He also notes that with companies and other non-state actors taking the leads in these new technologies, "there is also a need for international cooperation capable of defining common strategies, especially in favour of the most vulnerable countries and people."

Leo then draws attention to the impact of the digital revolution on human freedom. "When business models thrive on human weakness," he says, "the person is treated as a means rather than as an end; those who design or finance such systems bear a moral responsibility that cannot be ignored." He highlights the risk "of social control made possible by the massive collection of data and use of algorithmic systems." Again, he calls for "clear rules, transparency…and proportionate limits" in order to mitigate these risks.

He also draws attention to the many new forms of slavery in the digital age, often involving children in the extraction of rare minerals needed for technology, and young people, often women, employed at minimal wage to provide human input for the training of A.I. models. He says, "The fight against new forms of slavery is a decisive test for the ethical discernment of AI and digital transformation."

Strikingly, Leo included a lengthy history of the church's own long road toward condemning slavery, saying we cannot "deny or diminish the delay with which both society and the church came to denounce the scourge of slavery" and asking for forgiveness on the part of the church. He described this memory of "past complicity and blindness in the face of the injustice" as a "call to vigilance" in confronting similar challenges today.

Just as slavery assumes new forms, Leo also notes that today, "colonialism assumes new forms. It no longer dominates only bodies, but appropriates data, transforming personal lives into exploitable information."

Chapter 5: 'The Culture of Power and the Civilization of Love'

Leo points to "the risk that technology, detached from ethics and responsibility, will render decisions about life and death more rapid and impersonal, and will present the use of force as an immediate and viable option."

He notes that "the digital revolution is changing the nature of conflict" and "can lower the threshold for the use of force, shield people from responsibility and foster a culture in which the enemy is reduced to a statistic and the victim to 'collateral damage'."

Looking at this situation in the light of the five principles of the church's social doctrine, he says, "If we examine global dynamics, we can recognize more clearly the spread of a culture of power characterized by polarization and violence. The modern Babel can be seen not only in the globalized technocratic paradigm, but also in the remote clash between opposing imperialisms, between powers that wish to preserve their supremacy, and those that aspire to seize that supremacy, resulting in a multiplicity of local conflicts."

Yet, he says, "despite this downward spiral, we can also glimpse a great part of humanity that is striving to remain human and working to build the holy city of coexistence and peace" through "a civilization of love."

Leo writes, "In our time, a culture of power is taking hold, in which the availability of resources and the ability to dominate tend to dictate the agenda and criteria for decision-making. In this way, the common good of humanity is relegated to the background and the concrete tragedy of peoples at war is reduced to a secondary consideration in relation to strategic interests. This culture of power infiltrates society, changes relationships and behaviours, and grows by normalizing war, pursuing ever-greater military power, taking advantage of the crisis of multilateralism and fuelling a false realism that insists that there is no alternative."

He adds, “humanity is slipping into a violent culture of power, where peace no longer appears as a responsibility to be taken on, but as a fragile interval between conflicts. Today, more than ever, without prejudice to the right to self-defence 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.”

Referring to “the military-industrial complex,” Leo denounces “the enormous economic interests behind war” and describes how “the armaments industry, and countries that supply weapons, profit from a market that thrives precisely on conflicts.”

He condemns “the evolution of nuclear arsenals” and says, “The situation is further destabilized by the presence of new armed operatives, such as jihadist groups, private militias and criminal networks that mark the end of the State’s monopoly on the use of force.”

He then points to “the unceasing development of weapons systems, particularly those involving AI” and says, “the development and use of AI in warfare must be subject to the most rigorous ethical constraints, to guarantee respect for human dignity and the sanctity of life and to avoid a race to develop such arms.”

The pope writes, “it is not permissible to entrust lethal or otherwise irreversible decisions to artificial systems. No algorithm can make war morally acceptable.” He called for the establishment of “a shared framework—also at the international level—in order to curb the technological arms race.”

With respect to “the crisis of the multilateral system,” Leo notes that “the institutions established to safeguard the concept of a common future for all peoples and a global common good appear to have been weakened.” Indeed, “Instead of making progress, we are regressing from the significant turning point of the twentieth century

“What has also re-emerged,” he says, is “the reduction of complex issues into simplistic categories—‘me first,’ ‘friend or foe,’ ‘us or them’,” which lead to decisions “that are often irresponsible and undermine mutual trust among nations. The force of international law is thus replaced by the claim that ‘might makes right.’”

Leo writes, “A false pragmatism urges us to sever the roots of our history, as if it were possible to inaugurate a kind of ‘new creation’ detached from the past. Even those who cite important moral principles can fall into this historical nihilism, mistakenly believing that the atrocities of the twentieth century can never happen again. Yet, in reality, the same dynamics are re-emerging under new guises.”

A “false realism” is at the core of these issues, he writes, “based not only on the prevailing mentality of force, but on the cultural and anthropological belief that war is an inevitable part of human nature. As a result, the concern is no longer the search for peace.”

“What is truly irresponsible is *Realpolitik*,” the pope adds, or “the form of political ‘realism’ that sows in consciences and in society an attitude of resignation to the inevitability of war and dismisses peace and dialogue as utopian.”

The pope continues, “The construction of a world in a state of perpetual conflict is an evil and must be named for what it is. This way of portraying our current situation may seem bleak or pessimistic, yet I consider it necessary to do so.”

“The Christian perspective, however, is not limited to denouncing evil,” writes Leo. “We view history in the light of the crucified and risen Lord…We do not consider the present as a predetermined fate, but an opportunity for personal and collective conversion.” He notes that “Even in the darkest nights, the Lord raises up men and women who refuse to give up, who persevere in doing good, who protect the vulnerable and open pathways to reconciliation.”

“The civilization of love will not arise from a single or spectacular gesture,” he continues, “but from the sum total of small and steadfast acts of fidelity that serve as a bulwark against dehumanization.” He proposes “five paths toward daily and public responsibility: the need to disarm words, building peace through justice, adopting the perspective of victims, cultivating a healthy realism and reviving dialogue and multilateralism.”

He also emphasizes the need for diplomacy and multilateralism as well as “interreligious dialogue” and always prayer. (*This article was first published in the Jesuit magazine*, America)