

Contextual Introduction to the Reading of Pope Leo XIV's Encyclical *Magnifica humanitas*. Reconstructing the Conditions of Interpretation¹

Kontekstualne wprowadzenie do lektury encykliki Leona XIV
Magnifica humanitas. Próba rekonstrukcji warunków interpretacji

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Abstract: The article reconstructs the contexts that prepare the reading of Pope Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnifica humanitas*. The analysis covers continuity with *Rerum novarum*, the teaching on human dignity, Catholic reflection on algorethics, the distinction between human and artificial intelligence, and the social fields of AI reception: work, truth, privacy and war. The hermeneutical-contextual method serves to organise the documents, speeches and debates that define the encyclical's closest horizon of meaning and prepare its further interpretation within Catholic Social Teaching.

Keywords: *Magnifica humanitas*; artificial intelligence; Catholic Social Teaching; human dignity; algorethics

Abstrakt: Artykuł rekonstruuje konteksty przygotowujące lekturę encykliki Leona XIV *Magnifica humanitas*. Analiza obejmuje ciągłość z *Rerum novarum*, nauczanie o godności osoby, katolicką refleksję nad algoretyką, rozróżnienie między inteligencją ludzką i sztuczną oraz społeczne pola recepcji AI: pracę, prawdę, prywatność i wojnę. Metoda hermeneutyczno-kontekstualna służy uporządkowaniu dokumentów, wystąpień i debat, które wyznaczają najbliższe pole znaczeniowe encykliki oraz przygotowują jej dalszą interpretację w perspektywie katolickiej nauki społecznej.

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Słowa kluczowe: *Magnifica humanitas*; sztuczna inteligencja; katolicka nauka społeczna; godność osoby; algoretyka

Introduction

A social encyclical requires a reading situated within the doctrinal tradition, the historical circumstances and the public debate to which it responds. The need for such a reading becomes especially clear in the case of documents addressing phenomena that are new, multi-layered and rapidly changing. Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica humanitas* (Leo XIV 2026a), devoted to care for the human person in the age of artificial intelligence, belongs to this kind of text. Its subject is not a single technical tool, but a civilisational environment in which algorithmic decisions, data infrastructures, generative communication, the automation of work, the militarisation of technology and transhumanist visions of the future affect the way the human person is understood.

This article aims to reconstruct the contexts needed for an adequate reading of the encyclical. It does not offer a full commentary on *Magnifica humanitas*. However, it identifies the sources, concepts, and debates that provide an understanding of its intention, circumstances, content, and significance for Catholic Social Teaching. The method adopted is hermeneutical and contextual: it reads Leo XIV's document alongside earlier Church teaching, recent papal statements, the work of Vatican academies and selected theological, philosophical and social studies.

The article's thesis is as follows: the contexts preceding and accompanying *Magnifica humanitas* allow the encyclical to be read within the horizon of Catholic Social Teaching as a text concerned with the person in the face of new forms of technological power. Artificial intelligence, considered in these contexts, appears as a new social and anthropological question, because it affects not only the effectiveness of action but also work, truth, privacy, war, responsibility, and the understanding of the person. Omitting any of these dimensions weakens the preparation for reading the document and leads to an excessively narrow account: technical, sociological or merely doctrinal.

I. From *Rerum Novarum* to the Digital Question

The first context for reading *Magnifica humanitas* is the capacity of Catholic Social Teaching to renew its judgement when new forms of social power emerge. For that reason, the analogy with *Rerum novarum* (Leo XIII 1891) requires both a methodological clarification and an account of what, in the digital age, constitutes the new 'new things'.

1.1. *Method of Reading and the Updating of Polish Reflection*

The Polish tradition of Catholic Social Teaching provides useful tools for commenting on the Church's social documents. Czesław Strzeszewski pointed to the need to establish the principal papal idea, to compare the analysed text with other statements of the Magisterium, to interpret it in the light of Catholic philosophy and theology, to take account of socio-economic conditions and to recognise the document's practical consequences (Strzeszewski 2003). Władysław Piwowarski, in turn, emphasised continuity and renewal in the Church's social teaching: the permanence of principles and their historical application to new situations (Piwowarski 1991–1992).

In relation to *Magnifica humanitas*, these classical proposals need to be supplemented by recent studies on digitalisation, AI ethics, technological regulation and the anthropology of technology. In Polish scholarship, an important role is played by the *Dictionary of Catholic Social Teaching*, which orders the contemporary conceptual apparatus of CST in relation to the person, work, the common good, politics, economics and international affairs (Mazurkiewicz et al. 2024). Krzysztof Adamski asks whether CST is capable of designing the future amid AI development and the popularity of transhumanism (Adamski 2024). Maciej Mróz shows that AI may become for theology a new site of questioning about the human person, since technological artefacts co-create the culture in which human beings understand themselves and their destiny (Mróz 2024). Maciej Hulicki, Adam Zadroga, Jarosław A. Sobkowiak, Piotr Morciniec, and Adam Bielinowicz and Beata Bilicka develop specific areas of application: regulation, management, moral responsibility, the non-personal status of AI and religious education (Hulicki 2025; Zadroga 2025; Sobkowiak 2024; Morciniec 2025; Bielinowicz and Bilicka 2025).²

Thus supplemented, the method helps to avoid two simplifications. The first would treat the encyclical as an ad hoc reaction to a new technology. The second would reduce it to a somewhat abstract exposition of doctrine, without analysing the social structures of data, platforms, capital and automation. A contextual reading preserves both dimensions: the continuity of Church teaching and the novelty of the digital situation.

² A broader background to secular AI ethics and to research on the social costs of algorithmic systems is provided, among others, by the work of Dignum and Crawford, and by Jobin, Ienca and Vayena's survey of global ethical guidelines. These works are not the main object of the present article, but they define the international context against which Catholic algoethics develops its own language of the person, the common good and responsibility (Dignum 2019; Crawford 2021; Jobin, Ienca and Vayena 2019). In the methodological background, there also remains the account of Catholic Social Teaching as practical wisdom rooted in the tradition of the virtues (Yuengert 2023).

1.2. New ‘New Things’

The first interpretative frame for *Magnifica humanitas* is Leo XIII’s *Rerum novarum*. Leo XIV himself underscored this continuity by signing the encyclical on 15 May 2026, the 135th anniversary of the 1891 document, and by developing the analogy at its presentation on 25 May 2026. In his address, he recalled factory workers, families uprooted by industrialisation and new forms of poverty as the ‘new things’ of the industrial age. He described today’s development of AI as a transformation on a comparable scale, and even as more serious, since it concerns decisions that shape human coexistence and the conduct of war (Leo XIV 2026b).

This analogy should not be understood mechanically. Data are not simply equivalent to raw materials; the platform does not replicate the structure of the nineteenth-century factory; and cognitive automation is not merely another stage in the mechanisation of work. However, there is continuity in the social problem. *Rerum novarum* responded to a transformation that reorganised work, property, capital, poverty, family life and the role of the state. *Magnifica humanitas* responds to a situation in which algorithms, predictive models, generative AI and data infrastructures reorganise work, education, medicine, communication, security, politics, war and access to truth.

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* presents CST as part of the Church’s moral teaching, offering principles for reflection, criteria for judgement and directives for action (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004). From this perspective, Leo XIV’s encyclical is not a technical manual, but a document of moral discernment. It asks whether technological development serves the person and the common good, or rather, strengthens the concentration of power, inequality, social control and the reduction of human beings to data. Anna Rowlands, reading Catholic Social Teaching as a tradition of thinking about a politics of communion, helps us see AI not only as a tool, but as a culture of power and a model of social relations (Rowlands 2021). The same emphasis returned in her address at the encyclical’s presentation, where *Magnifica humanitas* was presented as a new synthesis of the Church’s social doctrine (KAI 2026).

2. *Dignitas infinita*: Dignity before Functionality

The declaration *Dignitas infinita* is not a document on artificial intelligence, but without it, AI can hardly be discussed in the language of Catholic Social Teaching. It recalls that every human person possesses an inalienable dignity,

rooted in his or her very being and independent of circumstances, condition or life situation (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024). In the age of AI, this claim becomes especially sharp because digital systems introduce a logic of comparing functions into social life. A language model generates text faster than a human; a financial algorithm assesses credit risk in a fraction of a second; a recruitment system sorts through thousands of applicants; a medical tool estimates the probability of disease.

If the value of the human being is linked to efficiency, speed, predictability, productivity, communicative fluency or cost-effectiveness, AI begins to appear as a measure of humanity. *Dignitas infinita* reverses this logic. A human being does not have dignity because he or she performs certain functions. He or she has dignity because he or she is a person. The person does not become less valuable when a machine performs certain tasks more efficiently. Human dignity does not arise from superiority over a technical artefact, but from what the person is.

This distinction becomes the first criterion for the reception of *Magnifica humanitas*: the dignity of the person is not a function of his or her functions. AI does not create the problem of dignity from nothing. It reveals and accelerates a pre-existing conflict between the ontological dignity of the person and social mechanisms that reduce human beings to mere usefulness, risk profiles, data, economic status, or institutional costs. Technology may mitigate this conflict if it is subordinated to the good of the person; it may also intensify it if it is designed solely according to the logic of efficiency.

Dignitas infinita connects dignity with concrete violations: poverty, war, the situation of migrants, human trafficking, violence against women, the marginalisation of persons with disabilities and digital violence (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024). This point matters for the discussion of AI. Technology does not affect an abstract 'user', but the sick and the healthy, the wealthy and the poor, citizens and migrants, adults and children, protected workers and workers dependent on platforms. The real test of the ethics of technology is therefore not the position of the privileged user, but the experience of the fragile, the weaker and those easily overlooked.

3. From Dignity to Algorithethics

The movement from dignity to algorithethics marks the passage from anthropological foundation to practical mediation. Once the person's dignity is affirmed as prior to usefulness, the design, deployment and regulation of algorithmic systems require criteria capable of translating that affirmation into technological and institutional practice.

3.1. *Rome Call for AI Ethics*

The next stage in preparing for the reception of *Magnifica humanitas* is the *Rome Call for AI Ethics*, signed on 28 February 2020 by the Pontifical Academy for Life, Microsoft, IBM, the FAO, and representatives of the Italian government (Pontifical Academy for Life and Signatories 2020). The document covers three areas – ethics, education and law – and six principles: transparency, inclusion, responsibility, impartiality, reliability, security and privacy. It is not a full theology of AI. It is rather the first widely recognised outline of Catholic algoethics, that is, the inscribing of moral criteria into the design, development, deployment, and regulation of algorithmic systems (Benanti 2018a; Benanti 2018b).

The importance of the *Rome Call* also lies in its model of cooperation. A Church institution entered into dialogue with the technology industry, public administration and an international organisation. AI cannot be the object of academic reflection alone, nor solely of state regulation. It requires the cooperation of theologians, ethicists, engineers, lawyers, educators, politicians, entrepreneurs and civil society. In this sense, the *Rome Call* prepares *Magnifica humanitas* from a practical perspective: *Dignitas infinita* explains why the human person must be protected; the *Rome Call* begins to answer how technology should be designed so that the protection of the person does not remain a declaration.

Transparency means that a person should not be subject to the decisions of a system whose operation he or she cannot understand, check or challenge. Inclusion also requires design for older people, children, persons with disabilities, migrants, users of peripheral languages, and communities of the Global South. Responsibility recalls that behind the operation of a system, there must always be a person or an institution. Impartiality requires a critical analysis of data, because models may preserve a history of injustice. Reliability becomes a condition for the use of AI wherever the consequences of error concern health, freedom or security. Privacy protects not only information, but also the space of conscience, relationships and inner life.

3.2. *Papal Academies and the Social Specification of the AI Question*

The Pontifical Academy for Life places AI within the horizon of bioethics, medicine, care, childhood, old age, loneliness, suffering and dying. In these areas, the difference between a technological and a personalist assessment of systems becomes especially visible. The technology sector usually asks whether AI diagnoses faster, classifies more accurately, lowers costs and shortens service times. The personalist perspective asks whether what is more effective is also more human; whether the automation of care weakens the presence of one person

with another; whether the patient is reduced to a risk profile or a therapeutic probability.

The Pontifical Academy of Sciences, in turn, brings the perspective of science, epistemology and research responsibility. The power of AI must be acknowledged, but it must not be absolutised. Children are especially important here: they are not simply younger users of systems, but persons in formation. AI may help them in learning, accessibility and therapy. However, it may also harm them through the manipulation of attention, false relationships with chatbots, cyberviolence, deepfakes, sexualisation, profiling and the commercialisation of data. The protection of the child cannot be shifted solely onto the family, because digital technologies operate on a scale that no single family controls.

The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences makes it possible to grasp AI as a new social question in the strict sense. The seminar *Digital Rerum Novarum: Artificial Intelligence for Peace, Social Justice, and Integral Human Development* placed artificial intelligence within the field of peace, social justice and integral human development (Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences 2026). The title itself has programmatic weight. Today's 'new things' are data, models, platforms, platform work, automation, algorithmic surveillance, the concentration of infrastructure and digital power. In the face of these phenomena, an appeal to the individual user is not enough. One must ask who owns the models, controls the data, sets the rules of platforms, benefits from automation, bears environmental costs and can appeal against a system's decision.

4. Francis, *Antiqua et Nova* and the Boundary of Intelligence

Pope Francis' teaching in 2023–2024 directly prepared the later documents on AI. In the message for the 57th World Day of Peace, 'Artificial Intelligence and Peace', Francis presented AI as an ambivalent technology: capable of serving peace, development and the common good, but also of deepening inequalities, destabilising societies, supporting disinformation and militarisation (Francis 2023). In the message for the 58th World Communications Day, he introduced the category of 'the wisdom of the heart' as a condition for fully human communication (Francis 2024a). AI can produce messages, but it does not have a heart; it can simulate empathy, but it does not suffer with others; it can generate content, but it does not bear personal responsibility for the truth of the word. In his address to the G7 session in Borgo Egnazia, the Pope strongly emphasised the need to preserve human control over decisions made with the help of AI systems (Francis 2024b).

These intuitions are ordered by the note *Antiqua et nova*, issued by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education.

Its basic claim is clear: AI can imitate some functions of the human intellect, but it does not possess human intelligence in the full sense (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education 2025). Human intelligence is not mere data processing. It belongs to the whole person: bodily, spiritual, relational, moral and historical, open to truth, goodness, beauty and God.

This distinction protects against the anthropomorphisation of AI. A system may recognise patterns, classify information, predict answers, generate text, image or sound, and give the impression of understanding. A result similar to a human one is not, however, the same as a human act of knowing. The human person knows through body, memory, relationships, history, suffering, language, silence, work, responsibility and openness to meaning. AI has no conscience, does not experience guilt, does not know mercy and is not answerable before God or the community. It may support human action, but it cannot take the place of the person as a moral agent.

At this point, the Polish studies of Sobkowiak and Morciniec are helpful. The former, drawing on the category of *actus humanus*, shows that a moral act requires reason, freedom and responsibility, which cannot be ascribed to a learning system (Sobkowiak 2024). The latter recalls that AI is not a person and that responsibility therefore remains with designers, owners, operators, regulators and users (Morciniec 2025). For the reading of *Magnifica humanitas*, this means one thing: wherever decisions concern persons, human beings must not be allowed to hide behind an algorithm.

5. *Quo vadis, humanitas?* and the Dispute over the Future of the Human Person

The document of the International Theological Commission, *Quo vadis, humanitas?*, raises the debate on AI to a broader level, namely, the future of the human person. It does not begin with algorithms, but with a basic question: who is the human being whose future is being described, enhanced, or redesigned today? The document places the development of AI within the horizon of transhumanism, posthumanism, biotechnology and technological acceleration (International Theological Commission 2026).

Transhumanism expresses the desire to overcome disease, ageing, disability, suffering, death, and the vulnerability of the body through technological means. Posthumanism goes further: it questions the uniqueness of the human being and blurs the boundaries between person, machine, animal and system. Christian anthropology does not reject healing, rehabilitation, support for persons with disabilities or technical creativity. It does, however, oppose the promise

of self-salvation through technology. The human being does not become himself or herself by escaping humanity, but by receiving, purifying, healing and fulfilling it in truth, love and relationship with God.

At this point, *Quo vadis, humanitas?* prepares the reading of the title *Magnifica humanitas*. 'Magnificent humanity' does not mean a human being deprived of body, weakness, dependence, old age, suffering and relationality. Nor does it mean a person measured by superiority over the machine. It means the human being recognised in dignity, received in fragility, developed integrally and capable of truth, responsibility, love and communion. Adamski rightly notes that CST cannot remain merely a teaching that reacts after the fact, since AI and transhumanism have become one of the motors of the imagination of the future (Adamski 2024). *Magnifica humanitas* enters this dispute precisely: not about technology as such, but about the anthropology that will guide its development.

6. The First Vatican Reception: To Disarm and to Build

The presentation of *Magnifica humanitas* in the Synod Hall on 25 May 2026 constitutes an important hermeneutical key. It was not an event external to the document. Rather, it was the first official reception, showing how the Holy See wants to place the encyclical in dialogue between the Church, science, technology, politics and society. The addresses by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, Anna Rowlands, Christopher Olah, Léocadie Lushombo and Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ created a map of problems: dignity, freedom, relationality, the culture of power, work, education, technological colonisation, conscience, integral ecology and peace (KAI 2026).

The strongest concept in the papal commentary is 'disarmament'. Leo XIV explained that he deliberately chose it to awaken consciences and indicate a path. To disarm AI means to free it from the logic that makes it a tool of domination, exclusion or death. The Pope compared this task to the Church's commitment to nuclear disarmament, because every great technical power requires adequate moral assessment and public control (Leo XIV 2026b).

Disarmament has several levels. The military level concerns autonomous weapons systems that may escape effective human control. The social level includes algorithms that intensify discrimination, exclusion and unequal access to basic goods. The economic level concerns digital monopolies and the concentration of data and infrastructure. The spiritual level exposes the desire for domination, which Rowlands interprets in the Augustinian key of *libido dominandi* (KAI 2026). AI then becomes a mirror not only of human inventiveness, but also of a disordered will to power.

The second verb is ‘to build’. Leo XIV stressed that merely limiting threats is not enough. He referred to the experience of rebuilding after floods in Peru and to the biblical figure of Nehemiah, who gathers people around the restoration of Jerusalem. Building means repairing bonds, trust and hope. AI can become a ‘building site of history’ from the perspective of communion, if technological progress learns to serve human life (Leo XIV 2026b). At this point, the encyclical goes beyond regulatory language. Its stakes also include the formation of consciences, education, the culture of encounter and the civilisation of love.

The papal pair ‘to disarm’ and ‘to build’ orders the further reception of the encyclical, because it connects the moral dimension with concrete areas of social life. The disarmament of AI requires identifying the places where technology may become a tool of domination, exclusion, manipulation or violence; building requires those same places to be designated as spaces of responsibility, justice and integral development. After the Vatican presentation, therefore, it is necessary to move to the fields in which the significance of *Magnifica humanitas* appears most practically: work, truth, privacy, and war and peace.

7. From ‘To Disarm’ and ‘To Build’ to the Fields of Social Reception: Work, Truth, Privacy and War

7.1. Work

Work remains one of the main fields of reception of *Magnifica humanitas*. Since *Rerum novarum*, the Church has recalled that the worker is neither an instrument of production nor a cost in an economic calculation. Work is a space for personal development, social participation, responsibility for the world, and cooperation with others. AI can support work: it can relieve people of monotonous, dangerous or degrading tasks, facilitate data analysis and broaden access to competences. However, it can also intensify surveillance, accelerate the pace of work, increase pressure on productivity, strengthen dependence on platforms, and deepen employment insecurity.

The CST question, therefore, is not: will AI increase productivity? It is rather: will the productivity growth serve the dignity of the worker, the family, the community, justice and integral development? Zadroga shows that, in management, AI requires analysis of transparency in decision-making, privacy, its impact on the labour market, and the elimination of bias (Zadroga 2025). If automation is understood only as replacing human beings wherever their work is costly, it will repeat the errors of industrialisation. If incorporated into an order of solidarity and reskilling, it may strengthen the person’s agency.

7.2. Truth and Communication

The second field is truth. Generative AI radically changes the conditions of public communication. False images, synthetic recordings, automatically generated narratives, deepfakes and mass propaganda can destroy a shared reality. This is not only a problem of 'fake news'. It is an anthropological and political problem. The human person needs truth to live responsibly; society needs trust to converse, argue, judge, choose, and build institutions.

Here, the papal 'wisdom of the heart' meets Polish reflection on fear and hope regarding AI, as well as on the philosophical sources of the problem of artificial intelligence (Lekka-Kowalik and Wojewoda 2023; Orbik 2023; Ferdynus 2023). In an age of excessive content, the capacity to generate messages is not yet human communication. What is needed is the formation of critical judgement, responsibility for the word and the protection of a space in which truth can be sought together.

7.3. Privacy

The third field is privacy. Personal data are not merely a record of behaviour, but a trace of the relational life of the person: movements, purchases, illnesses, contacts, fears, interests and daily rhythms. In the age of AI, data becomes an instrument of prediction and influence. Whoever owns data and models can not only describe behaviour, but also shape it. Privacy is therefore a condition of freedom. The person constantly observed changes the way he or she acts; the person profiled may be enclosed in his or her past; the person predicted may be treated as if his or her future had already been calculated.

7.4. War and Peace

The fourth field is war. AI affects cybersecurity, propaganda, target recognition systems, autonomous weapons, and geopolitics. In Catholic Social Teaching, peace does not mean only the absence of hostilities. It is the work of justice and the fruit of rightly ordered relations. If AI strengthens disinformation, the dehumanisation of the enemy, the automation of combat decisions and the distancing of the agent from the effects of violence, it weakens peace even when it does not operate directly as a weapon.

The problem appears most radically in relation to lethal autonomous systems. The decision to take life cannot be entrusted to a system that has no moral judgement. This is why the 'disarmament' of AI includes not only the restriction

of military applications, but also the liberation of technology from the logic of domination, exclusion and violence. Here, *Magnifica humanitas* discloses one of its most important dimensions: it is a document on the limits of permissible technological power.

Conclusion

A contextual reading of *Magnifica humanitas* shows that Leo XIV's encyclical is not an isolated voice on a new technology. It is the fruit of a process in which the Church gradually formulated a language capable of grasping AI as an anthropological, social, moral, political, ecological and spiritual problem. *Rerum novarum* provides the frame of continuity and novelty. *Dignitas infinita* recalls that the person must not be measured by function. The *Rome Call for AI Ethics* translates dignity into the language of algorethics. The teaching of Francis introduces the perspective of peace, communication and human control. *Antiqua et nova* protects the difference between human and artificial intelligence. *Quo vadis, humanitas?* broadens the question to the future of the human person. The presentation of the encyclical on 25 May 2026 reveals its dynamic: to disarm and to build.

The greatest danger is not the power of AI itself, but the combination of immense technical power with a weak moral culture. One can increase the capacity to calculate without deepening wisdom. One can expand communication without building communion. One can automate decisions while weakening conscience. One can develop systems of control without developing justice. The Catholic response is not fear of the machine, but the defence of the full truth about the human person.

Magnifica humanitas should therefore be read as a document about the person in the age of technological power. Artificial intelligence can serve human beings if it is subordinated to the dignity of the person, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, truth, responsibility, peace and care for our common home. It can also become a tool of dehumanisation if it is subordinated solely to efficiency, profit, control, domination and technological self-admiration. Magnificent humanity does not mean a human being without limits, body, weakness, dependence, suffering, relationships and God. It means a person recognised in dignity, received in fragility, developed integrally and capable of truth, responsibility, love and communion.

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