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To Dwell in Possibility

Intervista ad Antonio Spadaro

In May 2026, Pope Leo XIV released his first encyclical, Magnifica Humanitas. *The text has generally been described as a Vatican directive on Artificial Intelligence, but it addresses deeper questions about the threats posed to human dignity in an algorithmic age. To explore its true philosophical and geopolitical stakes, we spoke with Father Antonio Spadaro, a distinguished theologian and papal advisor who is known for his public writings – he has coauthored a book about cinema with Martin Scorsese. We discussed the Pope's intellectual formation, his philosophical challenge to Silicon Valley transhumanism and his head-on confrontation with President Donald Trump.*

Gavin Jacobson: Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, has been widely discussed – if not always accurately. What are people missing about this text? How are they misinterpreting its central message?

Antonio Spadaro: The *Magnifica Humanitas* is billed as an encyclical about artificial intelligence, but it's really a document about what it means to be human. It was composed during – and in response to – an ongoing revolution that is rewriting the coordinates of human experience: how we work, communicate with one another, and inform ourselves about the world; how we believe and even how we pray. Leo XIV signed it on 15 May 2026, exactly 135 years after Leo XIII's encyclical on capital and labour, *Rerum novarum*. Just as the first Leo upheld the dignity of the worker in the age of the steam engine, so the new Leo means to uphold the dignity of the person in the age of the algorithm.

At the heart of the text are two biblical metaphors. One is the Tower of Babel: humanity made uniform under a single language. The technological sector suffers from what the Pope calls "the Babel syndrome": it translates everything, even the mystery of the

human, into data and profit. The second metaphor is Nehemiah's Wall: when the exile returned to that ruined city of Jerusalem, rather than impose a plan from above, he assigned each household its own stretch of wall to rebuild. The question is not 'technology, yes or no'; it is how the power that technology generates ought to be distributed.

What people tend to miss about the encyclical is its anthropological stakes, which can be summed up as: the danger is not that machines will become human, but that humans will reduce themselves to machines. Misreadings tend to be of three kinds. The first is to read the text as a manual of technological ethics, and thus miss its political implications – its critique of the concentration of power in the hands of a plutocratic few and its call to "disarm" AI. The second is, conversely, to read it as a political pamphlet, and thus miss the underlying ethical questions about the risks AI poses to humanity. The third misreading is the crudest: mistaking the encyclical for a technophobic document. It is nothing of the sort. It says outright that technology is not "a force antagonistic" to humanity, nor "inherently evil." The *Magnifica Humanitas* does not say no to the machine, but rather yes to the human – a yes so full that it has no need to demonise anything.

How is a document like this produced?

The genesis of the *Magnifica Humanitas* is largely legible. Its intellectual foundations lie in *Antiqua et nova*, the doctrinal note that the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education published jointly in January 2025, at Pope Francis's wish. Those hundred and seventeen paragraphs laid the ethical groundwork. They draw a line between human and artificial intelligence.

An encyclical is not authored the way an essay is; it is the magisterial act of a pontiff – the fruit of a long, collegial labour. The process, in general, braids together several strands: the Pope's own reflection and public interventions (Leo XIV has spoken about AI repeatedly); the work of the competent dicasteries; consultations with theologians, jurists, scientists, and, in this case, AI engineers. A long editorial filing carries the text from the instructional to the full magisterial register. It is a labour of synthesis more than of invention: the task is to hold tradition and novelty – the mysticism of the

Carmelites and of the cobalt mines – together, to let Augustine and Hannah Arendt speak in the same breath.

Two details say a great deal about the method. First: the *Magnifica Humanitas* was drafted and released without a Latin original, a novelty enabled by a recent adjustment to Vatican norms: the text is meant to address "all men and women of goodwill", not only specialists. Second: the day after the encyclical was signed, the Pope established an inter-dicasterial commission on AI across seven Vatican bodies under an annual, rotating coordination. The form itself – a network, not a pyramid – mirrors the technology it is charged with confronting.

Does this particular encyclical have precedents?

The Church is not a stranger to the question of technology. In 1963, Paul VI promulgated a decree that spoke of the technologies of communication as "mirifica": marvelous things that touch the spirit. The next year, when addressing the Automation Centre of the Jesuit-run *Aloisianum* at Gallarate, he said something extraordinary: "the mechanical brain comes to the aid of the spiritual brain," and that effort to instill in mechanical instruments the reflection of spiritual functions was "raised to a service that touches the sacred". Our fears today are precisely the opposite: the logic of mechanical instruments is being instilled in the spiritual brain.

In our century, John Paul II has spoken of the media and of the internet as the "first Areopagus of the modern age"; and Benedict XVI of technology as an expression of human freedom to be governed in truth, and of the "digital continent".

Where the *Magnifica Humanitas* differs is in its scope. Rather than address AI as a new theme, it folds the technology into the very structure of Catholic social teaching, so as to rethink all its principles. To speak of algorithms, from now on, is to speak of the social doctrine of the Church.

What does the Pope mean when he writes about "disarming" AI?

It is one of the text's happiest inventions, because it shifts the conversation from ethics to geopolitics. "To disarm" AI, the encyclical argues, is to free it "from the mentality of 'armed' competition, which today is not limited to the military context, but is also an economic and cognitive phenomenon".

On the military front the refusal is categorical. Weapons systems with operational autonomy make war more 'practicable' and less subject to human control. An inviolable Christian principle holds that lethal decisions must remain in the hands of a person – who can then be answerable for them. No algorithm can make war morally acceptable. AI can only make war faster, more opaque and more impersonal. The technology will lower the threshold for the resort to violence.

On the economic front, disarmament entails breaking the equation between technical power and the right to govern: more efficient algorithms and larger data banks must not be pursued to exploit consumers, to extract their health data, epidemiological profiles and genetic maps. Hence, too, the proposal to move beyond GDP. and instead adopt metrics focused on the dignity of labour and the reduction of inequality. The cognitive front, equally, is a war for attention and imagination.

Let me add a critical note. The encyclical occasionally treats the technological sector in slightly too monolithic terms. There are people in Silicon Valley who work on AI safety for motives similar to the Pope's own, even if they are greatly outnumbered by those who pursue profit without restraint.

The encyclical refers to 'digital colonialism' – a striking concept. Do you think secular governments and global institutions are ready to hear that sort of language?

It is perhaps the most courageous passage in the encyclical, because it tears the veil of immateriality that surrounds AI. Nothing in that world is magical or incorporeal: every instantaneous answer rests on a chain of mediations. Beneath the technological gloss lies "the new forms of slavery": millions of data labelers and content moderators in the Global South, often young women paid a pittance; adolescents and children in rare-earth mines. Notably, the Pope acknowledges that the Church was historically late to condemn slavery and asks for forgiveness – not as retrospective contrition but as warning.

Will they be ready to hear it? I don't know. The Holy See has neither armies nor sanctions. It is an *auctoritas* that does not coerce but proposes, and that now and then moves the conversation. Francis's *Laudato si'* changed the way we talk about the climate. When Leo XIV, on his African journey this April, spoke unsparingly of the

concentration of technological and military power, those words carried an echo that no UN report could have achieved. But to renounce the question is to concede that the only possible language is the language of power.

Is the Pope mounting a rebuttal to the transhumanists of Silicon Valley, who aspire to overcome the physical and cognitive limitations of the human condition?

To a very deliberate extent, but without easy recourse to condemnation. The encyclical treats transhumanism and posthumanism with intellectual respect, as "an archipelago of conceptual 'islands', distinct yet connected by a common 'sea' of assumptions, namely the central role of technology and the aspiration to transcend the limits of the human condition". Technological development expresses a kind of desire for transcendence. The decisive question, then, is not *whether* to desire more, but *which* transcendence.

Against this Promethean dream, the Pope sets the mystery of the Incarnation. The Christian God does not enhance the human being from without, He descends into human fragility and transforms it *from within*. In a passage of rare density, the text affirms that there is an "infinite disparity" between our nature and the life of God, which can only be bridged by the Infinite that gives Itself. The Church thus proposes a fulfillment that is not seized but received, challenging the metaphysics of Silicon Valley head-on: the human being flourishes not in spite of limit, but often through limit. The magnificent humanity of the title is not the enhanced human being but the human being indwelt by God.

The Church is not a 'competitor' of OpenAI or of Anthropic, but their most radical interlocutor: it claims that the true "more than human" lies not in technical enhancement but in grace. And it does so in dialogue with its more reflective protagonists. That Anthropic's co-founder, Christopher Olah, was invited to speak at the encyclical's presentation, is the sign of that wager.

Is this Pope cut from the same cloth as his predecessor, or do they espouse different kinds of thinking?

Leo XIV does not repeat Francis but takes him up, develops him in a new context. The technocratic paradigm; the "common home" that becomes an integral ecology extended

to the digital environment; the "situated anthropocentrism" he picks up again in the conclusion: these are all Bergoglian tiles.

But their thinking has different spiritual roots. Francis was a Jesuit: his key was Ignatian discernment, the movement of the affections before reality. Leo is the first Augustinian pope, and the architecture of the *Magnifica Humanitas* is Augustinian to its foundations: the "two cities" and the "two loves" structure the central chapter, and the whole document takes its leave of the reader with Augustine's general concern about what we truly love. The Tower of Babel and Nehemiah's Wall are the narrative versions of the *amor sui* that builds towers and the *amor Dei* that builds habitable cities.

His bicontinental and missionary background has been formative. Robert Prevost was born in Chicago but is a Peruvian citizen by adoption; he spent years as a missionary among the poor, the miners, and the migrants of Chulucanas and Trujillo before leading the Augustinian order and the Dicastery for Bishops. He is a man who has lived at once in the heart of the empire and on its periphery. This allows him to credibly speak of the Global South – as well as to diagnose America from the inside. As someone who holds a degree in mathematics, he does not fear the technical substrate of the problem.

The encyclical's reference to J. R. R. Tolkien seems deliberate, given the author's influence on Peter Thiel.

Very much so. The encyclical entrusts to Gandalf the formula for responsibility in the age of algorithms: "It is not for us to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of the years in which we are set". Certain people in Silicon Valley have extracted precisely the opposite moral from Tolkien.

Peter Thiel named his company *Palantir*, and his funds and ventures *Mithril*, *Valar*, *Lembas*. He reads *The Lord of the Rings* as an epic of power, advantage and acceleration – whose message is that the strong shape the world. But the novel's moral core in fact lies in the renunciation of The One Ring: the refusal of absolute power, which cannot be wielded for good and must be destroyed. The protagonists are the Hobbits, the smallest of all. And the *palantír* – the seeing-stone that shows true images yet steers toward despair and deception anyone who believes

he commands it – is perhaps the most exact metaphor for a surveillance technology that sees everything but enslaves the person handling it.

To quote Tolkien, then, is to contest the ownership of a symbol. Leo XIV reclaims a Catholic author from the hands of those who had turned him into a prophet of techno-sovereignty.

The relationship between Leo XIV and Donald Trump has soured. Was that inevitable given their differing worldviews, or was there a specific rupture?

Both. There was always a structural incompatibility – and it was detonated by a specific course of events. In a little over a year, the friction has become what many observers call an unprecedented strain in modern history between a political leader and a Pope – the more striking for them both being American-born.

The escalation has recognisable dates. Leo's first sharp words came this January, against the American military intervention in Venezuela (the Vatican's ambassador was summoned to the Pentagon). At the end of February, when Trump threatened Iran by saying that "an entire civilisation will die tonight", the Pope called it "truly unacceptable," and urged the faithful to ask their representatives to work for peace. Trump replied with public attacks – "weak on crime", "terrible for foreign policy" – even going so far as to claim credit for the Pope's election.

The encyclical opened yet another front, and further revealed a fissure within the administration. Interior Secretary Doug Burgum brushed it aside – "I didn't know that tech editorialising was part of the role of being pope" – while J.D. Vance, the Catholic Vice-President, praised some of its passages as "profound".

I often like to say that there are two ways of seeing the global order: as a chessboard or a fabric. The former is made of opposing pieces and positions to be captured, a zero-sum game in which the strongest wins. The latter is made of interwoven threads: to cut one is to weaken the whole weave. 'Me first' is the logic of the chessboard; peace, migration, multilateralism and disarmament are the logic of the fabric.

The encyclical critiques what you have called a "new Americanism" – the sacralisation of power and the deification of efficiency. Is this a theological rebuke to Trumpism?

The encyclical does not name the powerful, but the reference is transparent. When it denounces the "culture of power" that feeds on "polarization and violence"; the "false realism" that presents war as inevitable; the "normalization of war" and rearmament as the automatic answer to every crisis; the construction of collective identity against an enemy – the reference is transparent.

Perhaps the most surgical passage arrives in paragraph 133, which denounces those who command "powerful technological and economic resources" and use them to "influence" people as to what the truth is about the human being, the world, the meaning of existence, the family, even God. The text calls this "pure power detached from truth".

Here another connection with Leo XIII reveals itself. In 1899, the first Leo wrote an apostolic letter, *Testem benevolentiae*, in which he intervened against "Americanism" – the tendency of some American Catholics to adapt doctrine to the values of the dominant culture, such as pragmatism, individualism and the primacy of action over contemplation. Leo XIV faces a new and far more powerful Americanism that no longer adapts faith to culture, but aims to fuse God, country and market in a civil religion. An Americanism that sacralises treats limit as a defect to be corrected: transhumanism transferred from individual biography to the nation state.

What do you think about an American rising to the top of the Catholic Church even as America's power is on the wane?

It is a historical coincidence laden with meaning. For the first time, an American sits in the chair of Peter, and he does so at the moment when a certain idea of America – not America as a nation but America as a metaphysics of power and efficiency – is seeking to universalise itself through technology. That the most radical critique of this metaphysics should come from a son of Chicago is no small paradox.

I believe Leo understands America in a way that many European prelates cannot. He knows it from within, speaks its language, and can distinguish the deep America – the America of parishes, migrants and working life – from the 'civil religion' that sacralises its power. This is why he can name the "new Americanism" without lapsing into anti-Americanism: he knows it is not the whole of America, he knows it is a deformation.

A European saying the same things would sound like a geopolitical adversary rather than an internal conscience.

Trump has cultivated a close relationship with certain strands of American Catholicism. How does Leo XIV's election and his subsequent positions complicate that relationship?

They complicate it profoundly, because they deprive those currents of the confidence that the Church, or at least its 'authentic' part, was on their side. For years a certain alliance – what Marcelo Figueroa and I have called "the ecumenism of hatred," which welds evangelical fundamentalism and Catholic integralism, and is nourished by Manichaean simplification – was able to present itself as the voice of 'true' Catholicism, against a hierarchy perceived as lukewarm or progressive.

Leo XIV makes that operation far harder. He is a son of the Midwest, not a European liberal theologian who can be dismissed as remote. He is doctrinally serious and conservative in formation, in the noblest sense. When such a pope leads social doctrine back to its source – the *Rerum novarum*, the dignity of labour, justice, peace – he reclaims that tradition from those who wished to bend it to nationalism.

The encyclical cannot be conscripted for the 'human first' of nationalism. It does not endorse the primacy of the man-who-dominates but safeguards the human-in-relation. It elegantly tells anyone who would enlist the Church that the Church will not be enlisted.

You have devoted your career to reflecting on the role that the Church has played in the modern world. What do you believe Catholicism – under this Pope, at this moment – has to offer to ordinary people, Catholic or not?

In an age that lives on instantaneous, polarised reactions, Leo XIV has chosen to be neither apocalyptic nor enthusiastic: he has chosen to think. That alone is a resource for anyone who feels overwhelmed – permission to slow down, to dwell in the question long enough for the answer to ripen.

To those who are afraid of what's happening in the world, the Catholicism of this Pope provides the conviction that their worth is not computable. To an algorithm, error is something to be eliminated; for a human being, it may be the beginning of a

transformation. As Emily Dickinson wrote: “I dwell in Possibility -” Dignity cannot be measured. It is a mystery that is received.

To those who are divided, it offers what I call a counterculture of encounter: incarnate presence against simulated semblance, the community that verifies together against the algorithm that rewards conflict. And to those who no longer trust institutions it offers something disarming – a Church that asks to be judged by the very criteria it proposes to the world: transparency, justice, the hearing of victims.

The resources, in the end, are not confessional. They hold for those who do not believe as well, because they touch what exceeds all measurement: art, prayer, silence, gratuitousness, and human encounter.