

In his new encyclical Pope Leo declares that a transformation in global governance is needed to meet the challenges posed by artificial intelligence / By THOMAS BANCHOFF

# Deus et machina

**J**OHN XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, the first papal encyclical addressed to the Church and the world, captured the global imagination. Its ringing call for peace and nuclear disarmament, just six months after the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis, drew public praise from John F. Kennedy, Nikita Khrushchev and other world leaders.

The *New York Times* printed the encyclical in full and, in its front page story, highlighted its call for an international public authority to address global challenges of peace, development and human rights. The headline both captured and exaggerated its global message: "Pope John Urges a World Nation to Guard Peace".

More than six decades later, Pope Leo's first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, is having a comparable global impact. Again, a technological revolution – this time artificial intelligence, not nuclear weapons – is a catalyst. And again a pope is bringing Catholic Social Teaching and its core principles of human dignity and the common good to bear on a global challenge. This time, too, the initial reaction has been positive. Many political and even some industry leaders have praised *Magnifica Humanitas* for its analysis of the opportunities and dangers of the AI revolution and its call to safeguard the human person. Even US Vice-President J.D. Vance, who has sparred with the Pope on issues of war and migration, publicly welcomed its publication.

A significant but so far overlooked contribution of the encyclical is its nuanced approach to global governance – and the cultural revolution necessary to make it work. In response to global issues of war, peace, and economic and social development, Leo's predecessors have periodically echoed John's call, in *Pacem in Terris*, for a "public authority with power" possessing a "world-wide sphere of activity". In *Centesimus Annus* (1991), for example, John Paul II supported "effective international agencies which will oversee and direct the economy to the common good". In *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), Benedict XVI wrote of an "urgent need of a true world political authority" amid the global financial crisis. And in *Laudato si'* (2015), Francis called for "stronger and more efficiently organised international institutions" to combat the climate crisis. In keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, Leo's predecessors all opposed centralised supranational institutions that would usurp the legitimate power



Uncritical worship: The Tower of Babel, as depicted in the Bedford Book of Hours

of states. They called for effective governance at the national and local level, wherever possible. But they also viewed stronger international institutions as a critical response to new global challenges.

**WITH LEO** there is a change of emphasis. He acknowledges AI as a challenge that requires global governance. But he envisions that governance as multilevel and multilateral, involving new forms of cooperation across international, national, and local institutions. "New collaborative efforts are needed among political leaders, labour organisations, the business world and the scientific community," he writes, "in order to develop rapidly adequate shared regulations and protections, including at the international level." A major

reason for a multilevel approach is the rise of powerful transnational corporations that dominate the AI sector – Leo does not call them by name but refers to them as "monopolies". He sees their technological power taking on an "unprecedented, predominantly 'private'

aspect, which makes it even more challenging to discern, govern and direct such power toward the common good". A concerted policy response is called for. As he puts it: "We must build forms of cooperation that respect the various levels of the global community and make them jointly responsible for the common good."

This multilevel approach to global AI governance does not exclude strong international institutions as long as effective national and local institutions are part of the mix. "I invite everyone to conceive of ways of cooperating and of more effective international institutions," Leo writes, "capable of safeguarding the global common good without compromising the legitimate diversity of peoples and nations." The United Nations has a role to play; Leo praises its historic efforts to advance peace and integral human development. But he also notes its current weakness and calls for "profound reforms". For international, national, and local institutions to work together to promote peace and tackle AI and other global challenges, a cultural shift is necessary. "This is not simply a question of technical adjustments," Leo insists, "for the crisis of convictions and values that also concerns the ethical foundations of nations makes it more difficult to direct multilateralism toward the true common good".

In the latter sections of the encyclical, Leo takes up the imperative of value change and cultural renewal through a critique of what he calls "the culture of power" – the dominant ethos in a world of geopolitical conflict and technological competition, where the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must, and war is again an instrument of foreign policy. Like Francis, who used the term "technocratic paradigm" to describe the uncritical fascination with power and technology, Leo calls for an alternative to a culture of power if AI-generated disaster, perhaps most alarming in the spectre of autonomous weapons systems, is to be averted. This culture of power "infiltrates society, changes relationships and behaviours, and grows by normalising war," Leo notes, "pursuing ever-greater military power, taking advantage of the crisis of multilateralism and fuelling a false realism that insists that there is no alternative."

For Leo, there is an alternative: the "civilisation of love" first proposed by Pope Paul VI on Pentecost Sunday in 1970. Leo presents the message at the heart of the Gospel, Jesus' call to love God and love neighbour, as both a personal and a political imperative. He defines Paul's civilisation of love as "a social order in which justice and charity are inter-

**Leo presents the message at the heart of the Gospel ... as both a personal and political imperative**

twined and love becomes the guiding principle of economic, political and cultural life". Building such a civilisation means "translating charity into structures of justice, giving institutional form to fraternity and regarding others – whether individuals or peoples – as allies necessary for building the common good". That work of translation takes time and patience. It is akin to Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem by drawing on the diverse skills of its varied inhabitants, a powerful image that Leo evokes throughout the encyclical.

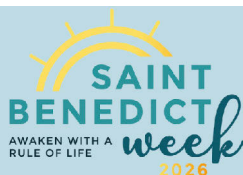
How might AI itself contribute to such a positive transformation? How can we counter the uncritical worship of technology and its unfettered pursuit, which Leo compares to the ill-fated project of the Tower of Babel? A first step is greater awareness of our interdependence as a global community. The internet, social media and AI have combined to tie us closer together, even as we remain divided along political, ideological, racial and other lines. The project of building a civilisation of love, for Leo, must transform our growing interdependence into a "willed and chosen solidarity". AI, he suggests, can contribute to "a universal human family, with shared rights and duties, where digital proximity becomes a real opportunity for encounter and mutual care".

**THE AGE OF AI** is an occasion to rethink human dignity, what we share in common, what is worth safeguarding. Love sets us apart from machines. In some of its most beautiful passages, the encyclical highlights our human weakness, vulnerability and dependence on one another. The universal experience of love, of caring for others and of being cared for in return, is a wellspring of solidarity – solidarity which can support joint efforts, from the local to the global level, to safeguard the human person in the age of AI.

As Leo himself emphasises, the gap between the speed of technological change and the slow pace of cultural and institutional transformation presents a looming danger. The frontier AI labs are locked in fierce competition, releasing new models at a dizzying pace, and the US and China are struggling for technological dominance. The culture of power still reigns supreme. Thankfully, some leading political and industry leaders have welcomed Leo's call to slow down and reflect on AI and its implications for the human person.

In the meantime, however, the technology is racing ahead with few guardrails. Pope John released *Pacem in Terris* after the world came to the brink of nuclear war. Leo, to his credit, has intervened before a potential AI-facilitated disaster, such as a cybersecurity meltdown, a bioterror attack or a war unleashed by autonomous weapons. There is still time. Let us hope that *Magnifica Humanitas* sparks an extended, global, multilevel dialogue about how to thrive into our inevitable AI future.

**Thomas Banchoff** is director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University in Washington DC.



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