

Leo XIV on upholding the Dignity of Work in the time of AI

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A new papal encyclical does not always attract the attention of the world's media, but Pope Leo XIV's letter on AI made headlines, last week. Entitled *Magnifica Humanitas*, its theme is 'safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence'. Notably, it discusses the impact of AI on work and, as such, it merits consideration in employment relations policy and practice.

The encyclical can be placed in the long tradition of Church 'social' teaching, which is often traced back to Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. In response to the industrial revolution, Leo XIII set out how Christian beliefs had implications for the relationship between employers and workers, calling for the former to respect the 'dignity' of the latter.

This implied moral duties to pay just wages and to ensure humane working hours, while workers had the right to form associations. In the decades that followed, subsequent popes expanded greatly upon this teaching.

Shortly after his election, the current pope observed that today we face 'another industrial revolution' with 'developments in the field of artificial intelligence that pose new challenges for the defence of human dignity, justice and labour'. One year later, *Magnifica Humanitas* is his reflection on how Christian beliefs and values can inform our approach to the AI revolution.

The encyclical's purpose is not to propose detailed prescriptions for law or policy; instead, it identifies the principles that should guide our evolving responses in this domain. Leo offers the Church's social teaching as 'a foundation for collective discernment, helping to recognize and promote whatever serves the dignity of persons, the vitality of communities and the common good' (no. 24).

PRIMACY OF HUMAN PERSON

Leo starts from the need to safeguard 'the primacy of the human person' (no. 97). He observes that AI lacks 'a moral conscience' (no. 99); it cannot experience the complexity of emotional relationships that underpin human interaction.

While Leo acknowledges the potential benefits to be derived from responsible deployment of AI, there is a risk that it reduces persons merely to an evaluation of the 'outcomes they produce' (no. 94).

Turning to work, Leo points out that AI can be used in ways that diminish human dignity. On one side, AI may reduce the availability of jobs and heighten insecurity in the labour market. This is unequivocally rejected: 'the pursuit of greater profits cannot justify choices that systematically sacrifice jobs, because the human person is an end, not a means' (no. 152).

On the other side, Leo observes that some applications of AI are damaging working conditions, e.g. through 'automated surveillance' that reduces workers' control over how they perform their jobs (no. 150).

In response, Leo holds that 'economic freedom is not absolute; it must always be measured against the common good and the dignity of every person'; entrepreneurship

must be oriented towards the creation of 'dignified, valuable jobs' (no. 157).

MESSAGE FOR UNIONS

In places, the encyclical is more specific about what needs to be done. There is a call for collaboration between the State, employers and trade unions to ensure new 'regulations and protections, including at the international level' (no. 155).

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Where algorithms influence 'personnel selection', then such decisions must be 'understandable, contestable and subject to oversight' (no. 164). Policies should be adopted to ensure that (re)training is accessible to all persons.

As regards trade unions, Leo asks that they 'be open to new types of employment and the corresponding needs of workers, in order to represent and defend them' (no. 155).

It is clear that AI has profound implications for the labour market, even if we cannot know the exact nature of what lies ahead. In this uncertain environment, *Magnifica Humanitas* reminds us of the need to ground our responses in enduring values in order to uphold dignified working life for all.

While it reflects a religious perspective, its orientations resonate strongly with those found in secular discourse. As such, there is much food for thought in this document that can nourish ongoing public deliberation on how to navigate this uncharted territory.

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1. <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/may/documents/20250510-collegio-cardinalizio.html>