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Guardians of the Conscience: A Summary, Review, and Critique of Pope Leo XIV's Magnifica Humanitas

The publication of a Pope's first encyclical is always a defining moment for the global Church, signalling the theological priorities and pastoral direction of a new pontificate. When Pope Leo XIV signed Magnifica humanitas ("Magnificent Humanity") on May 15, 2026, and released it to the world on May 25, the historic and symbolic weight of the document was immediately apparent. By choosing May 15 for its signature, Leo XIV explicitly aligned his first major teaching tool with the 135th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's groundbreaking 1891 encyclical, *Rerum novarum*. Just as his nineteenth-century predecessor responded to the systemic upheavals of the Industrial Revolution by vigorously defending the rights of labourers, Leo XIV addresses what he describes as a profound "change of era" precipitated by the rapid rise of artificial intelligence. Subtitled *On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence*, this encyclical serves as a modern counterpart to the Church's historic social teachings, asserting that the computational revolution presents not merely a technical challenge, but a profound existential and anthropological one.

Summary of Key Themes

Magnifica humanitas is structured as a pastoral and philosophical discernment of technological progress through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Rather than offering a blanket condemnation of AI or an uncritical celebration of its efficiencies, Leo XIV adopts a balanced, realistic framework. He explicitly praises technology as an authentic expression of God-given human creativity and intelligence, but issues a stark warning against allowing algorithmic optimization to become the absolute criterion of human value.

The text is artfully framed by two contrasting biblical motifs: the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah. In Leo XIV's view, Babel represents the modern danger of a "technocratic paradigm." It embodies a global society driven by a singular, cold logic that pursues self-sufficiency, uniformity, and technocratic domination at the expense of genuine human communication and diversity. Conversely, the Book of Nehemiah is presented as an inspiring blueprint for

ethical reconstruction, illustrating how human solidarity, shared local responsibility, and communal dialogue can restore a fractured society. At the heart of the encyclical lies a crucial distinction between functional utility and what the Pope defines as "ontological dignity." Leo XIV insists that dignity belongs to every human being simply by virtue of their existence—willed, created, and loved by God—and does not depend on a person's cognitive capabilities, economic output, or physical fitness. The document uses this theological baseline to launch a direct critique against transhumanist philosophies and futuristic visions of an "enhanced human being." It boldly asserts that human limitations, vulnerability, illness, and old age are not algorithmic "bugs" to be engineered away or optimized out of existence; rather, they are deeply woven into the mystery of human empathy, interdependence, and relational flourishing.

Furthermore, the Pope systematically extends traditional CST principles—such as the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity—into the digital ecosystem. Notably, he broadens the principle of the universal destination of goods to include "intangible and digital goods," arguing that massive data sets and algorithmic frameworks must not be monopolized by a few technocratic corporate entities. In the latter half of the text, Leo XIV turns his attention to the automated dehumanization of modern warfare, forcefully critiquing autonomous weapons systems. He warns that delegating life-and-death decisions to autonomous code entirely strips military engagements of moral accountability, urging the global community to reject this "culture of power" in favour of a "civilization of love."

Catholic Press Review and Commentary

The immediate response within the international Catholic press has been both extensive and highly analytical. Commentators writing for the National Catholic Register warmly praised the encyclical for shifting the dominant secular discourse away from mere technical specifications toward the enduring horizon of human frailty. The Register emphasized that by rooting the conversation in unalterable ontological dignity, Leo XIV effectively exposed the flaws of a modern culture tempted to see the human person as an optimization project rather than a soul called to relationship and communion.

Major Catholic developmental agencies and media networks also highlighted the text's socioeconomic edge. Analysts noted that the Pope correctly identified how the concentration of technological capital among tech

monopolies threatens to exacerbate global divisions between the technologically included and the marginalized. The press generally lauded the Pope's decision to present the encyclical personally at the Vatican—a departure from the customary practice of delegating the rollout to a panel of cardinals—interpreting it as a clear sign of the urgency he places on digital ethics.

A Critical Assessment

Despite widespread praise for its timely and prophetic character, *Magnifica humanitas* has encountered rigorous critiques from theologians and scriptural scholars. A prominent assessment published in *America Magazine* argued that the encyclical's pastoral use of the Tower of Babel narrative flattens the linguistic and historical nuances of the actual text of Genesis. The critique points out that in the biblical account, the primary danger of Babel was not merely that humanity forgot the source of its power, but that their total linguistic and corporate uniformity granted them an absolute, centralized power that God chose to dismantle. By focusing almost exclusively on human pride, the encyclical misses a vital sociological point: that hyper-centralized digital systems are dangerous precisely because they work too efficiently, crushing the local diversities and human boundaries that God deliberately built into creation.

From a practical policy perspective, the document can also be critiqued for its high degree of philosophical abstraction. While the call for a "civilization of love" provides an inspiring moral vision, the encyclical is remarkably sparse on concrete regulatory mechanisms. Translating lofty concepts like "digital subsidiarity" into actionable international law capable of checking borderless technology firms remains a glaring dilemma. The text leans heavily on moral persuasion, which may prove insufficient against the immense geopolitical and commercial incentives driving the current global AI race.

Relevance to the Scottish Readership

For the Catholic faithful and the wider public in Scotland, *Magnifica humanitas* arrives at a uniquely critical juncture. Over the past decade, Scotland has steadily positioned itself as a major European technology hub, with Edinburgh leading pioneering research in informatics and artificial intelligence, and Glasgow fostering a booming digital sector. Because Scotland is an active developer of these technologies rather than a passive observer, the Pope's warnings regarding workplace displacement, algorithmic bias, and automated

economic inequality strike remarkably close to home for Scottish workers, students, and academics.

The Bishops' Conference of Scotland warmly welcomed the encyclical immediately upon its release. Bishop John Keenan, President of the Bishops' Conference, hailed Magnifica humanitas as a "timely and insightful contribution to one of the defining questions of our age." Recognizing that the document demands localized reflection, the Scottish Church's Office of Communications and Evangelisation quickly announced the creation of a specialized parish study guide. This initiative aims to help local parish communities, from the urban centres of the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh to rural communities across the Highlands, grapple with the ethical dimensions of technology in their everyday lives.

Moreover, the encyclical's core arguments resonate deeply with Scotland's rich intellectual heritage. The tension Leo XIV identifies between mechanistic optimization and relational humanity mirrors the historical debates of the Scottish Enlightenment. Thinkers like David Hume and Adam Smith frequently argued that raw scientific and economic rationalism must always be tempered by "moral sentiments" and social sympathy. By demanding that technical progress remain a servant to human dignity, Magnifica humanitas challenges modern Scotland to balance its secular ambitions as a digital leader with the deep-seated moral, spiritual, and communal values that have historically defined its cultural identity.

Conclusion

Pope Leo XIV's Magnifica humanitas stands as a profound and necessary moral compass for an era grappling with unprecedented technological acceleration. By weaving classical theological wisdom into the complex realities of the digital age, the encyclical reminds the world that human magnificence is not found in the processing power of its machines, but in the sacred depth of human relationships, conscience, and love. Though it leaves open practical questions regarding international regulation and scriptural execution, its warm reception across the Catholic press and its acute relevance to technological hubs like Scotland ensure it will remain a cornerstone of ethical debate for years to come.