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Magnifica humanitas: **A First Reading**

1

The first encyclical of Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica humanitas*, is a lengthy document (245 numbered sections), rich and complex in content, which we must endeavor to receive.

It contains principles, reflections, experiences, and guidance for action. Indeed, the richness of its content calls for multiple readings and shared reflection.

Under no circumstances should we impose our own interpretive frameworks upon it (as it sometimes happens). For that reason, the opportunity provided by this first colloquium is especially welcome.

2

The Holy Father's first encyclical is a social encyclical, and this cannot fail to attract our attention, because it is not the usual practice.

3

Moreover, he has invoked Leo XIII and *Rerum novarum* as a precedent that serves as his inspiration. Indeed, this is why he adopted the name Leo upon his election.

Rerum novarum, however, was certainly not the first of Leo XIII's many encyclicals.

What, then, does it mean that the Holy Father begins with a social encyclical?

- i) The (external) reference to *Rerum novarum* offers us a clue: a technological transformation is taking place that has a decisive impact on the lives of individuals and societies.
- ii) This confronts us with the need to provide special protection for the human person in this new era of human history.
- iii) This alone would already seem to be sufficient reason: "Each generation," he tells us, "inherits the task of shaping its own time."¹

What he adds next, however, suggests a broader perspective –or, if you will, a deeper reason. That task consists in "guiding history to become a place where the dignity of every person is safeguarded, justice is promoted and fraternity is made possible."²

The Holy Father makes us see –as will become very clear throughout the document– that our Christian life is interwoven with the circumstances of time and place. It is not directed toward

1 Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, 1, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/es/encyclicals/documents/20260515-magnifica-humanitas.html>

2 Idem.

an inward-looking spirituality. Rather, it is —and must be— an interior life that does not abdicate its responsibility to make the world more humane.

Thus, quoting the words of John Paul II —which he cites in no. 50— he places us before the reality that “the human person always remains the «way for the Church».”³

“Founded on Christ,” he adds, “the living stone, we experience the powerful and mysterious action of the Holy Spirit, and we believe that every authentic human effort to cooperate with him for the good will be blessed by our heavenly Father, in whom we place our hope.”⁴

3

With this human and faith-filled vision, we cannot ignore that “today... we find ourselves facing a new situation

- i) in which the power and prevalence of emerging technologies are interwoven into the fabric of daily life,
- ii) shaping decision-making processes,
- iii) and deeply affecting the collective imagination.”⁵

He then echoes Pope Francis: “Never has humanity had such power over itself,”⁶ which —as we know all too well— immediately entails the power of some human beings over others, of a few over the vast majority.

3 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, 14.

4 Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, 2.

5 Ibidem, 4.

6 Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si*, 104.

The question, therefore, is: “Where are we going? Toward what goal do we wish to orient ourselves? What direction should we choose as a people and as a human community?”⁷

4

For this reason –and hence the recourse to Catholic Social Teaching– it will be necessary to discern “how to navigate responsibly the era of AI”⁸, how to safeguard the human person.

Ultimately, the question is which paths to follow in living out our responsibility as Christians, as men and women of faith who seek, in all things, to fulfill the Will of God.

I say “Christians” because, although the encyclical’s heading does not specify its intended audience, throughout the text the Pope exhorts and addresses Catholics, lay faithful, Christians, and men and women of good will.

5

We have noted that this is a social encyclical.

Even so, it is striking that the Holy Father devotes the first two chapters –more than 70 sections– to the history of Catholic Social Teaching –“how the Social Doctrine of the Church has taken shape (...) in order to demonstrate its dynamic character” –⁹ and then proceeds to present its “foundations and principles.”

7 Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, 6.

8 Ibidem, 7.

9 Ibidem, 17.

Why pause over a task that, in a certain sense, had already been accomplished?

Besides the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (2004), which the Pope cites, there is a document issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education on December 30, 1988, entitled Guidelines for the study and teaching of the Church's Social Doctrine in the formation of Priests, which offers a treatment of the subject similar to the one found in the encyclical.

Why, then, return to the subject in this way?

I would venture to suggest two reasons. First, the Holy Father wishes to make clear the foundation on which he bases his discernment of the present situation and of the guidance he offers for our mission. Second —in continuity with the first— he wishes to bring this doctrine to all men and women of good will.

Not only because, as one might suppose, it is not widely known among the general public, but above all because he sees the need to apply it in concrete circumstances: "My hope is (...) to help the lay faithful and people of goodwill rediscover their duty of implementing the above-mentioned principles in their daily lives, family relationships, work and involvement in society. Thus, they will let themselves be inspired by the aim of embodying God's love in the concrete events of life."¹⁰

He also extends an invitation: "to encourage academic institutions and universities to give fresh impetus to these principles, and to apply them in a way that will be relevant and effective in addressing the digital revolution."¹¹

¹⁰ Ibidem, 47.

¹¹ Ibidem, 47.

Accordingly, we must recognize that “the Social Doctrine of the Church is a living reality, in dialogue with history, cultures and sciences. At the same time, it enshrines a core set of unchanging truths. For this reason, it can be considered a form of wisdom that is capable of guiding the personal and societal lives of believers even today.”¹²

6

The foundation, as we know, is the human person, created in the image of God,¹³ whose dignity is inalienable and prior to any determination by the State. It is equal in every person,¹⁴ and in the modern age its primacy has found expression in the formulation of human rights.¹⁵

By nature, the human person is open to relationship and love and (as we see from the very act of creation) stands in need of others “It is not good that the man should be alone”¹⁶; and of social life.

Gaudium et spes summarizes this well: “Man’s social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on one another. For the beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life.”¹⁷

12 Ibidem, 46.

13 Ibidem, 48-50.

14 Ibidem, 51.

15 Ibidem, 54-58.

16 *Gén* 2, 18.

17 Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 25.

Having established this foundation, the Pope then proceeds through the following principles, detailing some of their contemporary applications: the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity, and social justice.

All of this leads to the concept of the integral development of society.

7

In the third chapter, he turns directly to the issue of Artificial Intelligence in relation to individuals and societies.

He draws on two contrasting biblical images —the building of the Tower of Babel and Nehemiah’s rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem— to ask us, without delay: What are we building?¹⁸

“We believers must and can choose which projects to work on and in what manner, so as to safeguard and value the grandeur of humanity that has been given to us as a gift.” He thus affirms the personal responsibility of each individual in the building of a more humane and fraternal society.¹⁹

Amid a technocratic paradigm —as Pope Francis called it— when technology becomes the criterion for decision-making and is taken as the measure of actions and projects, and in the face of the concentration of power in the digital world,²⁰ he seeks to recall “a few essential elements for a moral and social discernment that safeguards the primacy of the human person, in order to ensure that it will always be human intelligence, with its conscience

18 Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, 90.

19 Cfr. Ibidem, 91.

20 Ibidem, 96.

and freedom, that guides technical innovations and responsibly determines their use and limits”.²¹

He then proposes several important cautions in approaching the subject: first, that any statement about AI runs the risk of becoming obsolete in a very short time; and second, that all of us –including those who design these systems– know very little about how they actually function.²²

He then goes on²³ to offer a brief comparison with human intelligence, in which we might especially note the distinction expressed in the subtitle of Josef Weizenbaum’s seminal book (Computer Power and Human Reason): From Judgment to Calculation, the reduction of judgment (a uniquely human prerogative) to calculation (something machines do well).

Then, the use of AI “is never a purely technical matter” (like replacing an abacus with a calculator), because it profoundly affects human life; nor can it be regarded as “morally neutral”,²⁴ since –by collecting and processing information– it inevitably reflects the assumptions and preferences of those who originally designed it.

Particularly grave is the development of AI-related weapons: weapons systems with operational autonomy that make war more feasible and less subject to human control.

21 Ibidem, 97.

22 Ibidem, 98.

23 Ibidem, 99.

24 Ibidem, 99.

“For this reason, the development and use of AI in warfare must be subject to the most rigorous ethical constraints.”²⁵

“Moral judgment cannot be reduced to calculation, for it involves conscience, personal responsibility and the recognition of the other as a person.”²⁶

He then sets forth three specific criteria for discernment:

- The first such criterion concerns personal responsibility. When a decision to strike becomes automated or opaque, the risk of abdicating responsibility increases.
- The second criterion pertains to the moral timeframe for making judgments. While AI tends to expedite the decision-making processes, speed and efficiency should never be the supreme motivating force for the irreversible decisions made in the context of war.
- The third criterion is the identification and protection of civilians. Any technology that facilitates attacks without seeing the face of human beings lowers the moral threshold of conflict.²⁷

For this reason, the Pope has called for the “disarmament” of AI: “Disarming AI means freeing it from the mentality of “armed” competition, which today is not limited simply to the military context, but is also an economic and cognitive phenomenon. This entails a race for ever more powerful algorithms and larger datasets, driven by the desire to secure geopolitical or commercial dominance. To disarm means discrediting the assumption that

²⁵ Ibidem, 197.

²⁶ Ibidem, 198.

²⁷ Cfr. Ibidem, 199.

technical power automatically confers the right to govern. To disarm does not mean rejecting technology, but preventing it from dominating humanity.”²⁸

At the end of this chapter, he refers to the “underlying narratives” of transhumanism and posthumanism, in which the human being is ultimately treated as mere matter, while at the same time expressing –albeit imperfectly– a desire for transcendence. There is, indeed, a “more-than-human” reality that is found in the grace of God, in the supernatural elevation of the human person. “The Christian tradition has maintained that human beings are not confined by the boundaries of their own nature; rather, they are called to self-transcendence, not through an escape from reality or a contempt for their limitations, but through their fulfillment in love.”²⁹

And in that section on “the limit, the heart and the grandeur of the human person,” he makes a particularly important affirmation –especially in the face of the fatalism of our age: “history does not appear solely as a record of human violence, but also as evidence that humanity is capable of creating institutions that protect our shared life”;³⁰ “history can also change when individuals truly take the dignity of everyone seriously”.³¹

8

The question of history becomes even more prominent in the reflections of the fourth chapter, on safeguarding what is human amid social transformation.

28 Ibidem, 110.

29 Ibidem, 127.

30 Ibidem, 123.

31 Ibidem, 124.

He gives particular attention to three lines of reflection, each concerning what is most properly human: truth, work, and freedom.

Considering truth as a common good touches upon the human person's essential openness, the capacity to know reality. Consequently, it also concerns the capacity to relate to others as truly other. The impact of digital technologies on communication deserves serious consideration: it affects our very interpretation of life –the narratives that shape the social imaginary– and has a profound impact on democracy as a way of life. The field of education requires particular care.

The impact of AI and new technologies, which are “rapidly transforming the very structure of work”, makes it especially important to protect the dignity of work, “a fundamental dimension of the human experience”.³²

Freedom –which makes the person, as the subject of his or her own actions (*causa sui*, according to the classical expression), capable of love and of self-giving, in which personal fulfillment is attained– is being profoundly affected by the digital revolution. We must break the chains of these new forms of slavery. This struggle is a “decisive test for the ethical discernment of AI and digital transformation.”³³

It then becomes necessary to recall “the urgent need for reflection and action that keep the inalienable dignity of every human being and the common good, as both the focus and goal of society, as well as the guiding criteria for every personal, social and political choice. Without this ethical and humanizing

³² Ibidem, 154.

³³ Ibidem, 174.

reflection, the growing power of digital systems could lead us toward new atrocities that are no less shameful than those of the past that we now deplore, while we continue to present ourselves as “advanced” and “civilized” societies.”³⁴

9

In the fifth chapter, the reflection developed thus far culminates in a broad examination of the confrontation between the culture of power and the civilization of love.

These are two opposing logics, already represented by the biblical images of Babel and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and rooted in St. Augustine’s doctrine of the two cities.

A culture of power is becoming entrenched –one that normalizes war in the name of a supposed political realism and promotes the unchecked expansion of power.

Underlying this is a distorted view of the human person and, above all, an understanding of history as an ultimately impersonal arena, in which responsibility is abdicated in the name of the logic of power.

In response, the Holy Father returns to St. Paul VI’s expression, the civilization of love, which “consists in 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.”³⁵

34 Ibidem, 174.

35 Ibidem, 186.

In the international sphere, “the project for a civilization of love, therefore, must undertake the task of transforming this imposed interdependence into a willed and chosen solidarity.”³⁶

The civilization of love —a vision that we must recover today with renewed conviction— “is no naïve utopia, but a demanding project.”³⁷ We might even say, with Jacques Maritain, that it is a concrete historical ideal.³⁸ Yet we must overcome the temptation to think “the problems are too big and we are too small (...) We all have our own areas for action, and it is precisely there —and nowhere else— that we must choose whether to fuel the mentality of force (even if only through indifference, cynicism, lies or hatred), or to preserve the mindset of peace (with truth, moderation, closeness and care).”³⁹

He then introduces the quotation from *The Lord of the Rings* that has attracted so much attention. Faced with the prospect of Gondor’s defeat and of giving his life in battle, Gandalf says: “It is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till.”⁴⁰

Ultimately, we view history in the light of the crucified and risen Lord, to whom the Father has given “all authority in heaven

36 Ibidem, 187.

37 Ibidem, 186.

38 See Jacques Maritain, *Humanisme intégral*, ch. IV, I. Aubier-Montagne, 1968, p. 135.

39 Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, 212.

40 Ibidem, 213.

and on earth (Mt 28, 18)".⁴¹ This brings us to the conclusion of the document.

We can see clearly that the Holy Father's approach, grounded in the Church's Social Doctrine and, as such, coming from moral theology,⁴² advances to bring forth a theology of history.

10

"We have reflected on the world we are building, and we asked ourselves what it means to safeguard the human person in the era of artificial intelligence. At the end of this reflection, I would like to propose a sober yet demanding program of Christian life with which we can navigate this epochal change in the light of the Gospel."

He then explains: "This avenue emerges through contemplating God's plan, living ecclesial unity by partaking of the Eucharist, building a world centered on the common good and praying in union with the Blessed Virgin Mary."⁴³

"At the heart of everything is the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us."⁴⁴ "For this reason, as a believer among believers, I invite everyone to contemplate, in the face of the Son of God, the grandeur of humanity that shines a light also on the era of AI."⁴⁵

41 Ibidem, 210.

42 Cfr. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 41.

43 Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, 229.

44 Ibidem, 231.

45 Ibidem, 232.

“This human face is the fullness toward which history is moving. It is the mystery of «recapitulation»: the certainty that the Father has decreed to bring all things, those in heaven and those on earth, back to Christ, the one Head.⁴⁶ In this plan, nothing will be lost that is authentically human. Indeed, everything will be purified and reunited in the One, who gathers every fragment of life, every tear and every authentically human achievement, rescuing them from nothingness and delivering them, redeemed, to the Father.”⁴⁷

“The spirituality I wish to commend,” he tells us, “is that of the «wise architect» who, driven by hope for the Kingdom of God, is committed to building the world for the common good.”⁴⁸

“The task of building in our time must place our relationship with God at its center. Our rule must be the acceptance of human limitations as a natural and positive reality, and should be characterized by shared responsibility and a language characterized by the Gospel.”

“In this task, we are called to assume an active role, without taking refuge in spiritual sentimentality or retreating into our own little worlds. We must be faithful to the truth, invest in education, cultivate relationships and love justice and peace.”⁴⁹

Let us conclude, then, with the summary offered by the Pope himself: “the fourth pillar of this program for Christian life –after the faith that contemplates the Father’s plan of love, the charity that unites us in one ecclesial body, and the hope that sustains

46 Cfr. *Ef* 1, 10.

47 Idem.

48 Cfr. *I Cor* 3, 10.

49 Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, 236.

our action in the world— is prayer. Mary’s song accompanies our commitment.”⁵⁰

“With the same faith as Mary, let us become “weavers of hope” in our world, sharing who we are and what we have, so that the presence of Jesus may grow among us and his Kingdom take shape (...) The Lord continues to make all things new and offers every era the possibility of becoming part of salvation history in the light of the Incarnation.”⁵¹

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50 Ibidem, 236.

51 Ibidem, 245.