

A Magnificent Humanity

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(Number in parentheses indicate the reference in the encyclical.)

There is a question at the heart of Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical that is so plain it might be mistaken for simple. Confronting the rise of artificial intelligence and related technologies, the Holy Father asks, "What are we building?" (90). He poses the question against two biblical images: the Tower of Babel, raised to "make a name" for its builders without reference to God, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem under Nehemiah, where a ruined city rose again not by one strong hand but through the shared labor of all — priests and artisans, families and young people, each assigned a portion of the wall (7-8). The choice, Pope Leo insists, "is not between a 'yes' or 'no' to technology, but rather between constructing Babel or rebuilding Jerusalem" (9).

Magnifica Humanitas takes its name from the Magnificat, the song Mary sings when she proclaims what God has done in her: "he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden" (Lk 1:48). Here is the answer to the pope's question hidden inside the title itself. The grandeur of the human person — the magnificent humanity the encyclical sets out to safeguard — is not something we construct, scale or seize, but something we receive, as Mary received it, and then magnify in praise.

This is why the Holy Father weighs artificial intelligence according to the Church's social doctrine, whose measure is neither efficiency nor innovation but the integral flourishing of the whole person — "a theology of communion in history" (27). To read the encyclical is to keep his question open rather than settle it too quickly, for it bears, as he insists, on both our aims and our means.

THE STRANGE NECESSITY OF OUR LIMITS

One of the hardest sayings in the encyclical comes early, and it lands close to home: "Building for the common good means accepting the limits and

weakness of humanity without considering them an error to be corrected” (12).

We feel the temptation he names every day. The body tires. The memory slips. The child will not be hurried, and the parent has begun to need us more than we are ready to be needed. And everywhere the technological imagination promises a way out: an upgrade for every weakness, a patch for every flaw.

Pope Leo names the deeper currents beneath that promise — transhumanism and posthumanism, which would climb out of the human condition or dream the person away entirely into the machine. He explains, “Everything that appears as a ‘limit’ — incapacity, illness, old age, suffering, vulnerability — tends to be seen primarily as a defect to be corrected, rather than as a reality through which our humanity matures and opens itself to relationship” (118).

Optimize the limit away, and you optimize away the better part of being a person — for it is precisely in our weakness that patience, mercy and love first find something to do.

The movement of God in history runs in exactly the opposite direction, for Christ takes our limitations and weakness as his own — “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped” (Phil 2:6). The Christian tradition has always known we are made for self-transcendence — “not through an escape from reality or a contempt for [our] limitations, but through their fulfillment in love” (127).

Where an algorithm treats an error as a flaw to be deleted, a person can find in that same error the very door through which grace walks in. “A person’s future is not calculable,” Pope Leo writes; it hangs instead on a freedom lifted up by grace and on the relationships we cultivate (128).

The refusal of limits has a public face, too. Pope Leo observes that the technological order has grown not merely competitive but violent — in autonomous weapons, commercial domination and the privileging of the haves over the have-nots. The dream of the enhanced individual and the race for dominance are merely Babel by another name. And so the pope

reminds developers that “every design choice reflects a vision of humanity” (111), and that technology must serve the common good.

Most of us are not technological developers, yet these temptations reach us in smaller ways: the question half-formed before the answer is summoned, the draft we no longer bother to write ourselves. Pope Leo turns from the towers to the ordinary person and the ordinary device, naming three things that deserve a vigilant eye: “the ease with which results are obtained, the impression of objectivity and the simulation of human communication” (100).

The ease that genuinely makes life simpler can also hollow out our creativity and judgment, training us to want the result without the labor that would have formed us.

But the third danger is the most quietly devastating, because simulation does just enough to dull our hunger for the real thing. “When words are simulated, they do not build genuine relationships, but only their appearance,” the pope writes, and the deepest risk is not that we mistake a machine for a person but that we “may gradually lose the very desire to form genuine human connections” (100).

This is the heart of the matter, for these tools are fundamentally different from human intelligence. “So-called artificial intelligences do not undergo experiences, do not possess a body, do not feel joy or pain, do not mature through relationships,” Pope Leo notes. “They may imitate language, behavior and analytical skills, or even simulate empathy and understanding, but they do not understand what they produce, for they lack the affective, relational and spiritual perspective through which human beings grow in wisdom” (99).

A simulated friend has no limits for us to bear with, and so it can never become a real friend.

CULTIVATING COMMUNION

Which brings us to the encyclical’s warmest imperative, given almost as a command: “Let us cultivate relationships!” (239).

Cultivation is patient work. It asks that we accept our own limits and resist the temptation to begrudge others theirs, wishing our spouse less forgetful or our neighbor less strange.

The concreteness of our humanity is found exactly here, in the peculiarities of our histories — none of it yet finished, all of it still on the way toward its completion in God. To cultivate a relationship is to receive another's unfinishedness as patiently as we hope to have our own received.

The whole document rests on a conviction constant in Catholic teaching: that the human person is good — all of the person, the body included. Real places, real faces and real time cannot be swapped out for their images. Thus, Pope Leo asks us to cherish “places and times where physical presence remains crucial, such as shared meals, Christian community gatherings, time spent with the lonely and serving the poor,” for these are the signs of a people who still believe that every body is a dwelling place of God (239).

For Knights and their families, this is less an abstraction than a way of life already within reach. It begins in the home: the unhurried meal, the rosary prayed together, the discipline of being fully present to the people under your own roof — limits and all.

The second opportunity lies in the works of mercy done together — meeting the poor face to face and helping children encounter Christ in the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned and the lonely.

The third is in the parish in the fullness of its life: the Mass that gathers us bodily around one altar, the sacraments, the friendships forged across the pews. These are not smaller things than the great questions of artificial intelligence; they are where the answer is actually built, stone by stone, in the only city that finally matters.

What are we building? The encyclical refuses to let the question settle into either naive enthusiasm or unfounded fear, returning us instead to the choice between Babel and Jerusalem. Pope Leo gives that choice its deepest name in the mystery that “the Word became flesh,” the authentic alternative to every dream of transcending our humanity by our own

contrivance: “the divine love that descends into the most fragile point of our history and renews it from within” (232). In Christ, God saved us not by escaping the limits of our nature but by taking them on.

The grandeur of humanity is received, not seized — the very thing Mary sang — and our part is to build accordingly: to accept our limits and bear with one another’s, choosing the real over its likeness, and so remaining, against every dehumanizing pressure, profoundly and gratefully human.

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