The Human Person in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: (*Human digital dimensions)* Theological, Anthropological and Pastoral Implications in the Light of *Magnifica Humanitas*

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping education, communication, work, relationships, pastoral ministry and the ways in which human beings understand intelligence itself. The Christian question raised by this transformation is therefore not simply whether artificial intelligence is beneficial or harmful, but what its growing presence means for the human person created in the image and likeness of God. Drawing principally on Pope Leo XIV's 2026 encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, and supplemented by *Antiqua et Nova*, *Towards Full Presence*, Scripture and contemporary research in cognitive psychology, education and human-computer interaction, this paper argues that AI must be evaluated within an integral Christian anthropology. Human intelligence is inseparable from embodiment, affectivity, relationality, freedom, moral responsibility, memory, vulnerability and openness to God. AI can imitate certain products of intelligence and simulate interpersonal responsiveness, but it does not possess a body, undergo human experience, love, suffer, exercise conscience or mature morally through relationships and responsibility. Particular attention is given to cognitive offloading and memory, critical thinking, AI-mediated relationships, emotion and empathy, behavioural influence, character formation and the pastoral implications of substituting artificial interaction for embodied human encounter. Contemporary pastoral experiences—from livestreamed worship and digital catechesis to AI-assisted homily preparation and young people's growing recourse to digital systems for answers and companionship—demonstrate both the possibilities and limitations of technological mediation. The paper proposes a pastoral approach neither of technological rejection nor uncritical adoption, but of human-centred discernment: AI should augment rather than substitute human intelligence, lead digital encounters towards embodied communion, preserve cognitive and moral agency, and remain subordinate to the integral flourishing of persons created in the image of God.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence; Magnifica Humanitas; imago Dei; human dignity; embodiment; cognitive offloading; human relationships; pastoral ministry; character formation; digital culture.*

1. Introduction: The Question Is Becoming Anthropological

Artificial intelligence has moved remarkably quickly from specialist laboratories into ordinary human life. Students use generative AI to summarise readings and prepare assignments; professionals employ it to draft reports and analyse information; families encounter algorithmic recommendations every day; pastoral workers can use it to translate texts, prepare catechetical material, generate communication content and organise administrative work. Increasingly sophisticated conversational systems can also imitate dialogue, reassurance and even empathy.

These developments undoubtedly offer genuine benefits. The Catholic response to AI cannot therefore begin with technological fear. Human creativity and technological ingenuity belong to humanity's capacity to cultivate creation. *Antiqua et Nova*, the 2025 Note of the Dicasteries for the Doctrine of the Faith and for Culture and Education, explicitly recognises science and technology as expressions of human creativity that, properly directed, can participate in humanity's stewardship of creation[1].

Yet the rapid development of AI also raises a question deeper than technological usefulness:

What happens to the human person when increasingly significant dimensions of thinking, remembering, communicating, choosing, creating and relating are mediated—or performed—by artificial systems?

Pope Leo XIV places precisely this anthropological concern at the centre of *Magnifica Humanitas*. The encyclical does not treat AI merely as another technology requiring regulation. It asks what must be protected if humanity is to remain genuinely human. The Pope warns against a technocratic anthropology in which human flourishing becomes identified with efficiency, optimisation, control and the elimination of weakness. When efficiency becomes the principal measure of value, persons themselves risk being perceived as objects to be optimised rather than subjects called to relationship and communion[2].

This paper argues that the principal pastoral challenge presented by AI is consequently not that machines may become human, but that human beings may gradually surrender capacities essential to becoming fully human.

The issue is not whether a machine can produce a homily, answer a theological question, write an essay, simulate sympathy or recommend a course of action. Increasingly, it can. The more important questions are: What happens to the preacher who no longer wrestles prayerfully with the Word? What happens to the student who receives answers without undergoing the intellectual struggle necessary for understanding? What happens to friendship when companionship is sought primarily from an entity programmed to respond? What happens to character when inconvenience, waiting, disagreement, failure and intellectual struggle are progressively engineered out of human experience?

These questions require dialogue between theology and empirical science. *Magnifica Humanitas* provides the anthropological and moral framework; cognitive psychology, educational science and human-computer interaction can help identify what is actually occurring in human behaviour at different stages of development.

2. *Imago Dei*: The Human Person Cannot Be Reduced to Intelligence

The theological starting point is Genesis:

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[1] Antiqua et Nova, Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence, Dicastery For the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education, 2025.

[2] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 112-113, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/leo-xiv/pdf/encyclicals/Encyclical%20Letter%20of%20His%20Holiness%20Leo%20XIV%20Magnifica%20Humanitas%20(15%20May%202026).pdf

“God created man in his image; in the image of God, he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). There are some core dimensions of formation in safeguarding such as imbalance of power, abuse of conscience, separation of roles and affective maturity.

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* establishes a fundamental distinction between human persons and their technological creations. Human dignity does not arise from computational capacity, productivity, speed, memory, physical strength or economic usefulness. It belongs to the person because the person is created and willed by God.

Magnifica Humanitas develops this doctrine relationally. God is not solitary but a communion of Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and the human being created in the divine image is likewise created for communion. The person discovers himself or herself through self-gift and is called into relationship with God, other human beings and creation[3].

This is crucial for evaluating AI because contemporary language easily encourages an implicit equation: *greater intelligence = greater value.*

If intelligence is understood primarily as the capacity to process information, recognise patterns, produce language and solve problems, AI already surpasses human beings in certain narrowly defined tasks. But the conclusion that machine intelligence therefore approximates human personhood rests upon an impoverished understanding of intelligence. Lacks capacity to listen and accompany in the process of solving problems which needs the human touch, human senses and critical thinking.

Magnifica Humanitas rejects that reduction. AI can imitate functions associated with human intelligence and can greatly exceed humans in computational speed. Nevertheless, its operation remains based upon data processing. It has no bodily experience, does not feel joy or pain, does not mature through relationships, and does not know love, friendship or responsibility from within. It possesses no moral conscience[4]. Thus, not upholding personal safety tailored to pastoral realities and cultural responsiveness.

Antiqua et Nova makes the same distinction. Human intelligence develops through the physical and psychological growth of an embodied person whose understanding is shaped by sensory experience, emotions, social interaction, moral formation and a unique personal history. AI does not undergo this developmental history[5].

Consequently, the human person is not merely a less efficient version of an intelligent machine.

A child with an intellectual disability is no less human than a professor. An elderly person experiencing cognitive decline does not lose human dignity because a computer remembers more information. A person who cannot read remains infinitely more than an algorithm capable of processing an entire library.

[3] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 48-50.
[4] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 99.
[5] Antiqua et Nova, 31, 32, 65.

Christian anthropology therefore establishes a fundamental principle: *Human dignity precedes human performance* engrained in values of love, trust, fidelity, honest, understanding justice, peace and freedom.

This principle should govern every pastoral, educational and ethical evaluation of AI.

3. Embodiment: Why the Human Body Matters

One of the most important Christian responses to digital culture concerns the body.

The Christian person is not a mind temporarily inhabiting biological machinery. The human being is an embodied unity. Our bodies are not accessories to personhood; bodily existence belongs to the way human beings know, communicate, love, suffer, worship and enter relationships.

The Incarnation gives this conviction its deepest theological foundation: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14).

Christianity does not proclaim that God transmitted saving information to humanity. The Word became flesh, and lived among us. (Jn 1:1-4)

Christ touched lepers (Mk 1:41), allowed the suffering to touch him (Mk 5:27–34), ate with his disciples, washed their feet (Jn 13:1–17), wept at the tomb of Lazarus (Jn 11:35), suffered bodily, died bodily and rose bodily.

It is therefore highly significant that *Magnifica Humanitas* concludes its reflection on AI by returning to the Incarnation. The vulnerable flesh of Christ reveals authentic humanity as openness, communion and solidarity with vulnerable human flesh. (Magnifica Humanitas, nos. 231–233)

A pastoral experience: livestreaming the Eucharist

One of the clearest recent pastoral experiences of the distinction between digital connection and embodied communion emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When churches were inaccessible, livestreamed Masses became a genuine pastoral lifeline. The Dicastery for Communication recalls the extraordinary moment of 27 March 2020 when Pope Francis prayed in an empty Saint Peter's Square while millions participated through television and digital media. Technology overcame geographical isolation and created a real experience of spiritual solidarity[6].

Yet the same experience revealed technology's limits. A person watching Mass online could hear the Gospel and homily, see the elevation and pray with the community. But the screen could not give that person sacramental Communion. It could not reproduce gathering bodily with the ecclesial community.

Towards Full Presence expresses the distinction vividly: one cannot share a meal through a screen. A meal involves taste, smell, gaze, conversation and bodily presence; similarly,

[6] Towards a full presence, 60, 61.

Eucharistic participation engages mind, spirit and body. The document consequently insists that embodiment matters to Christianity and that digital media should complement, rather than substitute for, encounter "in the flesh"[7].

The lesson extends beyond liturgy. A bereaved person may appreciate a WhatsApp message saying, "I am praying for you." But there remains something irreplaceable about someone arriving at the home and sitting beside the grieving person.

A hospital patient may receive encouragement through a video call. Yet holding the patient's hand communicates something the screen cannot. A young person may receive catechesis through YouTube. But formation also occurs when that young person enters a community, encounters an elderly parishioner, serves beside another young person, disagrees with someone and learns to belong. Technology can mediate presence. It cannot exhaust its meaning.

4. From Connectivity to Communion: AI and Human Relationships

The distinction between connection and communion is especially important as AI becomes conversational. Human beings are relational not merely because they communicate, but because they give and receive themselves in relationships with other persons.

Relationships involve reciprocity. The other person is not under my control. A spouse sometimes disagrees with me. A child interrupts me. A friend may misunderstand me. An elderly relative may repeat the same story. A parish community contains people I would not necessarily have chosen as friends.

Precisely these experiences form us. They teach patience, compromise, forgiveness, fidelity, humility and self-giving. AI companionship introduces a different relational structure. A conversational system may remember preferences, respond immediately and produce words that sound compassionate. It may be available at two o'clock in the morning and never become tired of the conversation.

Emerging research suggests that this can have psychologically meaningful effects. Research published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* found that interactions with AI companions could temporarily reduce users' feelings of loneliness[8]. Such findings should not be dismissed. For someone isolated or unable immediately to access human support, an AI interaction may provide genuine subjective relief.

But relief from loneliness is not identical to human communion. AI does not need the person with whom it communicates. It does not freely choose fidelity. It cannot become vulnerable before the other. It cannot sacrifice itself because it loves. This is why the encyclical's

[7] Towards a full presence, 47, cf. 63.

[8] Julian De Freitas, Zeliha Oğuz-Uğuralp, Ahmet Kaan Uğuralp, Stefano Puntoni, AI Companions Reduce Loneliness, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Volume 52, Issue 6, April 2026, Pages 1126–1148, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucaf040

anthropology matters. AI may simulate empathy and understanding, but it lacks the affective, relational and spiritual perspective through which persons grow in wisdom[9].

A pastoral danger therefore arises if artificial companionship becomes preferable precisely because it eliminates the demands of human relationship. Christian love is not built around finding a perfectly responsive other. It involves learning to receive an other who is genuinely other.

This is why *Magnifica Humanitas* calls Christians to preserve places where physical presence remains crucial: meals, Christian community gatherings, visiting lonely people and serving the poor. The Pope describes these embodied encounters as signs of a humanity that continues to recognise the body as a dwelling place of God and temple of the Holy Spirit[10].

The pastoral principle should therefore be: *Use digital connection to lead towards human communion, rather than allowing artificial connection to become its replacement.*

5. Emotion: AI Can Simulate Empathy but Cannot Feel

The emotional dimension further demonstrates the difference between artificial and human intelligence. Human emotion is embodied. Fear can accelerate the heartbeat. Grief can exhaust the body. Anxiety can disturb sleep. Joy can produce laughter. Compassion can bring tears. Love creates attachment and can move someone to sacrifice.

Emotions are not merely information about mental states. They belong to the person's lived history. AI can recognise linguistic patterns associated with emotion and generate an appropriate response: “I am sorry that you are experiencing this.”

“I understand why you feel hurt.”

But there is an ontological distinction between producing the language of compassion and experiencing compassion. The machine is not sorry. It has not experienced grief. It does not fear losing the person speaking to it. It does not love.

This distinction has direct implications for pastoral ministry. A bereaved person may use an AI system at midnight to organise thoughts or find a Psalm. That may be useful. But pastoral care cannot be reduced to supplying appropriate words. Sometimes the most important pastoral act is silence: a priest, religious, catechist or neighbour sitting with another person when no adequate words exist.

Human presence says: *Your suffering concerns me. I am here with you.* AI can generate that sentence. Only a person can give himself or herself through it. For this reason, pastoral ministries involving grief, trauma, spiritual accompaniment, marriage difficulties, discernment and vulnerability should resist replacing personal accompaniment with automated simulation.

6. AI, Memory and the Intellectual Person

[9] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 99.
[10] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 239.

The intellectual consequences of AI require greater nuance. Human beings have always used external cognitive tools. Writing itself externalises memory. Books preserve knowledge. Calculators reduce computational effort. Smartphones store appointments. Psychologists Risko and Gilbert describe cognitive offloading as using external actions or resources to reduce the cognitive demands of a task. Cognitive offloading is not intrinsically harmful; it can release mental resources for more demanding activities[11]. The pastoral and educational problem begins when offloading ceases to assist cognition and starts replacing the exercise through which cognitive capacities develop.

Sparrow, Liu and Wegner's influential experiments found that when people expected information to remain externally accessible, they showed lower recall of the information itself while becoming better at remembering where it could be found. The researchers described the Internet as functioning as a form of external or "transactive" memory[12].

Generative AI extends this phenomenon. The student no longer merely asks: Where can I find the answer? The student can ask: *Give me the answer. Summarise it. Compare the arguments. Write the introduction. Draw the conclusion.*

The cognitive offloading is potentially much deeper. A 2026 study involving 353 university students found several distinct patterns of generative-AI use. Learning motivation strongly predicted reported critical-thinking gains, while deeper cognitive offloading predicted greater relinquishment of cognitive autonomy. Importantly, the study was based on self-report and therefore should not be treated as proof of cognitive deterioration. Nevertheless, it demonstrates why the manner of AI use matters[13].

Recent systematic reviews reach a similarly balanced conclusion. A 2026 review of 39 peer-reviewed studies found that structured and guided AI use can benefit critical thinking, while passive or unguided use may encourage cognitive offloading and reduce analytical engagement. The authors also caution that the evidence base remains methodologically uneven[14]. Another review of 67 empirical studies found that ChatGPT can support critical and creative thinking when embedded within inquiry-based and scaffolded learning, whereas unstructured use more readily produces cognitive offloading[15].

[11] Risko E, Gilbert S, Cognitive Offloading, Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 20, 676-688

[12] Sparrow B, Liu J, Wegner DM. Google effects on memory: cognitive consequences of having information at our fingertips. Science. 2011 Aug 5;333(6043):776-8. doi: 10.1126/science.1207745. Epub 2011 Jul 14. PMID: 21764755.

[13] Si S, Qi Y, Xu J, Qi X. When Thinking Is Outsourced: Cognitive Offloading and the Heterogeneity of Critical Thinking Among Chinese University Students Using Generative Artificial Intelligence. J Intell. 2026 Jun 24;14(7):116. doi: 10.3390/jintelligence14070116. PMID: 42505927; PMCID: PMC13413235.

[14] Nasr, N.R., Tu, CH., Sujo-Montes, L. *et al.* Generative artificial intelligence impact on critical thinking in higher education: a comprehensive bibliometric analysis and systematic review. *J. Comput. Educ.* (2026). https://doi.org/10.1007/s40692-026-00396-z

[15] Changyue Li, Hang Cui, Linda Serra Hagedorn, The cognitive impact of ChatGPT in higher education: A systematic review of critical and creative thinking outcomes, Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence, Volume 10, 2026, 100571, ISSN 2666-920X, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2026.100571.

Therefore, it would be scientifically unjustified to say simply: AI diminishes intelligence. The better conclusion is: AI can either scaffold human thinking or substitute for it. That distinction is pastorally decisive.

7. The Catechist, Student and Seminarian: Formation Cannot Be Outsourced

Consider a familiar educational situation. A catechist preparing to teach the parable of the Good Samaritan can now ask generative AI: "Prepare a 30-minute Catholic catechetical lesson on Luke 10:25–37, including an introduction, questions, activities and conclusion." Within seconds, a polished lesson may appear. The tool has saved time.

But suppose the catechist simply prints the response and delivers it. Something may have been lost. The catechist has not necessarily sat with the Gospel, struggled with the text, asked what it means for this particular community, remembered the wounded people encountered in the parish, prayed over the passage or allowed the Word first to challenge the catechist. The lesson may be technically competent while the catechist remains unformed by the lesson being taught.

The same problem applies to seminarians and priests. In February 2026, Pope Leo XIV warned the clergy of Rome against the temptation to prepare homilies with AI. His reasoning was strikingly anthropological: just as bodily muscles weaken through disuse, human intelligence needs exercise. More fundamentally, however, he observed that AI cannot share the preacher's faith[16]. That distinction is essential. A machine can generate a homily about forgiveness; it cannot forgive. It can generate a meditation on prayer; it cannot pray. It can produce a reflection on Christ's suffering; it cannot believe in Christ. It can formulate a testimony; it cannot testify to what God has done in its life, because it has no life of faith.

The appropriate pastoral response is not necessarily to forbid priests and catechists from using AI. It may assist with research, translation, structure, language correction or brainstorming. But it must remain after or alongside human engagement, not replace it.

A useful formation principle would be: Encounter first; assistance second. Read first, think first, pray first, attempt first. Then use AI critically where it genuinely assists.

8. Education: Preserving "Cognitive Friction"

The same principle applies to Catholic education. Learning requires a certain amount of difficulty. The student who struggles to remember, formulate, compare, argue and revise is not simply wasting time before arriving at an answer. Much of the learning occurs in the struggle itself.

Recent educational research has used the helpful concept of preserving cognitive friction. A 2026 framework published in *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* argues that AI integration should preserve opportunities for conceptual interpretation, inferential reasoning, evaluative judgement, metacognition, intellectual curiosity and epistemic

[16] Leo XIV, Address of Pope Leo XIV-Meeting With the Clergy of the Diocese of Rome, Audience Hall, 19 February 2026, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2026/february/documents/20260219-clero-romano.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

integrity. It proposes treating large language models as provisional thinking partners and deliberately alternating AI-supported and AI-free phases[17].

This provides a useful model for Catholic schools, universities and seminaries. For example, instead of: "Ask AI to write an essay on Catholic social teaching." a lecturer might require students to:

1. formulate their own thesis;
2. construct their initial argument without AI;
3. ask AI to generate a counterargument;
4. identify weaknesses and factual errors in the AI response;
5. consult primary sources;
6. revise their argument;
7. explain where AI helped and where it failed.

Here AI does not replace thinking. It provokes thinking.

UNESCO similarly advocates a human-centred approach to generative AI in education, emphasising human agency, ethical validation, age appropriateness and pedagogical design[18]. Catholic education should go further still. Its goal is not simply intellectual competence but formation of the whole person. The question is therefore not merely: Did the student produce a good assignment? It is: What intellectual habits did the student acquire while producing it?

9. AI and the Formation of Character

This brings us to perhaps the most neglected dimension: character. Human character develops through repeated acts. Patience develops through waiting. Courage develops through confronting fear. Perseverance develops through difficulty. Responsibility develops through accepting consequences. Humility develops through recognising error. Forgiveness develops through being wounded and choosing reconciliation. Prudence develops through making judgements in complex situations. No person acquires virtue merely by possessing information about virtue.

In Aristotelian and Thomistic ethics, virtues are stable dispositions developed through habituated good action. One becomes just through doing just acts; courageous through acting courageously; prudent through exercising practical wisdom.

Magnifica Humanitas provides an important contemporary insight here. AI's "learning" is fundamentally different from human maturation. Human beings allow themselves to be formed by life and grow through choices, mistakes, forgiveness and fidelity. That observation has profound pastoral consequences. Suppose a young person experiences disagreement

[17] Mireia Vendrell, Samantha-Kaye Johnston, Scaffolding critical thinking with generative AI: Design principles for integrating large language models in higher education, Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence, Volume 10, 2026, 100572, ISSN 2666-920X, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2026.100572.
[18] UNESCO, Towards a human-centered approach to the use of generative AI, https://unes.co/vvle9m

with a friend. AI can compose the apology. But composing an apology is not identical to becoming reconciled. Suppose AI tells someone exactly what to say during a difficult conversation. The advice may be useful. Yet the person must still develop courage to have the conversation, humility to listen and patience to remain when the conversation becomes uncomfortable. Suppose a seminarian routinely asks AI to resolve every difficult theological question before wrestling with it personally. He may acquire answers without developing intellectual patience. Character formation requires some experiences that technology cannot undergo on our behalf[19].

The pastoral question is consequently not simply whether AI makes human activities easier.

It is: which difficulties should not be eliminated because passing through them helps form the person?

10. Behaviour, Algorithms and Human Freedom

AI also affects human beings at a level more subtle than deliberate use.

People do not simply use algorithms; algorithmically structured environments increasingly shape what people encounter. *Magnifica Humanitas* warns that the digital attention economy can capture time and attention by exploiting vulnerabilities and thereby weakening interior freedom. It further warns that algorithmic systems can profile, predict and influence behaviour, while the architecture of visibility—what is amplified, hidden, rewarded or penalised—can shape opinions and choices[20].

This has obvious pastoral significance. A young person may begin watching harmless material and gradually be led towards increasingly extreme content. A person experiencing marital dissatisfaction may receive a stream of content reinforcing resentment. Someone interested in a political question may repeatedly encounter material confirming only one interpretation. A teenager already insecure about appearance may encounter increasingly personalised beauty content. In such situations, technology is not merely supplying information requested by a neutral user. It is participating in the formation of attention, desire and perception.

Christian moral formation has always concerned desire as well as action. Jesus does not address only outward behaviour; he addresses the heart (cf. Mt 5:21–30). Digital literacy should therefore become part of contemporary formation of conscience.

Pastoral ministry needs to teach people to ask: Why am I seeing this? Who benefits from keeping my attention? What emotions is this content cultivating in me? Is this making me freer? Is it making me more truthful? Is it helping me love God and neighbour? What kind of person am I becoming through what I repeatedly consume? These are spiritual questions as much as technological ones.

11. The Human Person Is More Than the Rational Faculty

[19] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 99.
[20] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 170-171.

One of the great anthropological dangers surrounding AI is that its remarkable cognitive performance can cause humanity to overvalue the very dimension that machines imitate most successfully. *Magnifica Humanitas* warns against absolutizing intelligence. When intelligence becomes the measure of everything, affection, will, commitment and relationships can be eclipsed. Technical power may paradoxically leave persons more isolated and vulnerable rather than more human[21].

Christian anthropology instead understands human flourishing integrally. The human being reasons. But the human being also loves, remembers, promises, suffers, hopes, repents, forgives, believes, worships and sacrifices.

A mother caring through the night for a sick child is expressing something profoundly human that cannot be measured principally by intelligence. An elderly spouse caring for a husband or wife with dementia may receive very little reciprocal cognitive recognition. Yet the fidelity of that care reveals human greatness. A priest sitting silently beside a dying parishioner may accomplish no measurable "task". Yet that presence may be among the most meaningful acts of his ministry.

A technologically efficient society can therefore still be anthropologically poor. The measure of civilisation, Pope Leo argues, lies not simply in the power of its instruments but in its capacity to recognise and care for persons[22].

12. Pastoral Ministry in an AI Culture

What, then, should the Church do?

12.1 Neither rejection nor surrender

The first requirement is balance. AI can assist translation, administration, research, accessibility, communication, data analysis and educational preparation. It may enable pastoral resources to reach communities previously excluded by language, distance or disability. The Church should not romanticise a pre-digital past. Indeed, the Dicastery for Communication argues that the relevant question is no longer whether Christians should engage the digital world, but how they should inhabit it as loving neighbours[23].

But usefulness does not justify unrestricted delegation. The Church needs criteria for distinguishing tasks that can appropriately be automated from dimensions of ministry that require human presence, judgement and responsibility.

12.2 Formation of clergy and pastoral workers

Seminary and ongoing clergy formation should include AI literacy. Future priests need to understand what generative AI can and cannot do, how hallucinations and bias occur, how privacy may be compromised, how sources should be verified and where pastoral confidentiality prohibits irresponsible use. But technical literacy is insufficient.

[21] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 113.
[22] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 114.
[23] Towards a full presence, 1.

Formation should ask the deeper question: What dimensions of priesthood cannot be automated? Listening; Spiritual discernment; Sacramental ministry; Preaching arising from prayer, faith and knowledge of one's people; Accompaniment; Compassion; Moral responsibility; Presence at death, grief, celebration and crisis. AI may assist the priest. It cannot be priest to the community.

12.3 Catechesis

Catechists should be trained to use AI critically rather than simply receiving generated material. AI can help simplify a difficult theological concept, suggest questions or translate catechetical content. But the catechist remains responsible for doctrinal accuracy and pastoral appropriateness. Most importantly, catechesis is not merely information transfer. Christ did not say, “Download everything I have taught you.” He said: “Follow me” (Mt 4:19). Christian formation is apprenticeship in a way of life.

12.4 Families

Parents require support in understanding that the principal issue is not simply “screen time”. The deeper issue is formation through digital environments. Families should protect spaces in which bodies are present to one another: shared meals, conversation, prayer, household responsibilities, visits to relatives, recreation and silence.

A phone-free family meal may appear insignificant beside global debates about AI governance. Anthropologically, however, it may be one of the most important responses a family can make. Around a table, a child learns to wait while someone else speaks, notice another person's mood, interpret facial expressions, disagree without leaving the conversation, tell stories and experience belonging. These are profoundly human capacities.

12.5 Young people

Young people need more than warnings. They need adults capable of accompanying them within digital culture. *Magnifica Humanitas* explicitly calls adults to rediscover their vocation as educators and to accompany children and young people in using technology so that they develop responsible relationships, recognise risks and choose what strengthens interior freedom. The Church should therefore create spaces where young people can discuss their actual AI use without immediate condemnation: schoolwork, companionship, entertainment, sexuality, anxiety, identity, creativity and faith questions. Pastoral accompaniment begins by listening to the world they actually inhabit[24].

13. Towards a Pastoral Principle: Augmentation Without Substitution

The research examined in this paper suggests a useful distinction between augmentation and substitution. When AI augments human capacity, it may contribute to flourishing. When it substitutes for the exercise of capacities essential to human formation, greater caution is required.

[24] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 238.

Thus:

AI may assist memory, but should not eliminate the need to know.

AI may assist reasoning, but should not replace judgement.

AI may assist writing, but should not replace thinking.

AI may support education, but should not replace the teacher-student relationship.

AI may facilitate communication, but should not replace communion.

AI may provide emotional support, but should not be confused with reciprocal human love.

AI may support pastoral preparation, but cannot replace prayer, discernment or lived faith.

AI may recommend actions, but cannot assume moral responsibility.

AI may simulate empathy, but cannot suffer with another.

This principle is supported by contemporary educational research. Structured AI use can enhance reasoning and creativity, while unstructured dependence can foster cognitive offloading[25]. It is equally consonant with *Magnifica Humanitas*: human intelligence, conscience and freedom must remain responsible for technological innovation and its limits[26].

14. Towards a Pastoral Ecology of AI

A pastoral response to AI should consequently develop what might be called a pastoral ecology of technology. An ecology asks not merely whether one element is good or bad, but how its presence affects the whole environment. The pastoral question therefore becomes:

How does this technology affect the ecology of human formation? Does it strengthen or weaken relationships? Does it increase or diminish attention? Does it encourage intellectual curiosity or intellectual passivity? Does it support responsibility or encourage its delegation? Does it increase freedom or create dependence? Does it lead people towards community or deeper isolation? Does it help people encounter reality or retreat from it? Does it preserve the vulnerable person at the centre? Does it assist the human person in becoming more capable of truth, goodness, beauty, communion and self-gift? This approach avoids both technological determinism and technological naïveté. Technology does not have to determine humanity's future. Pope Leo explicitly calls for AI to be "disarmed"—not destroyed or rejected, but prevented from dominating humanity and redirected towards genuinely human purposes[27].

15. The Pastoral Priority of Physical Presence

One pastoral priority deserves particular emphasis: the recovery of presence.

[25] Nasr, N.R., Tu, CH., Sujo-Montes, L. *et al.* Generative artificial intelligence impact on critical thinking in higher education: a comprehensive bibliometric analysis and systematic review. *J. Comput. Educ.* (2026). https://doi.org/10.1007/s40692-026-00396-z

[26] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 97.

[27] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 110.

Digital communication has enabled the Church to reach extraordinary numbers of people. Livestreams, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, podcasts and increasingly AI-assisted communication can bring Scripture, catechesis and ecclesial information across geographical boundaries. These are genuine pastoral goods. But metrics can deceive. A parish may have thousands of online followers and still contain lonely people. A livestream may have thousands of views while an elderly parishioner receives no visitor. A catechetical video may reach thousands while young people lack adults who know them by name. A Church can become highly connected while its members remain insufficiently encountered. This is precisely why *Towards Full Presence* argues for a "both-and" rather than an "either-or" approach: digital relationships should strengthen local communities, while embodied communities should enrich digital presence[28].

The ultimate pastoral test of digital evangelisation should therefore not simply be: How many people did we reach? but also: Towards what kind of encounter did we lead them? Christian communication should ultimately lead towards communion.

16. Conclusion: What Kind of Human Beings Are We Becoming?

Artificial intelligence confronts humanity with extraordinary possibilities. It can increase access to knowledge, assist persons with disabilities, support scientific research, improve communication, reduce repetitive work and provide educational opportunities previously unavailable to many. A Christian evaluation should welcome these possibilities. But technological capacity cannot itself determine what ought to be done. The deeper question posed by *Magnifica Humanitas* is anthropological: What must never be lost[29]?

The Christian answer begins with the conviction that the human person is created in the image and likeness of God. Human beings are not simply information processors. They are embodied persons. They enter relationships. They experience joy and suffering. They remember. They reason. They choose. They fail. They repent. They forgive. They make promises. They develop virtues. They bear responsibility. They search for meaning. They worship. They love. And they are capable of communion with God. No machine acquires human dignity by performing some intellectual functions better than a person.

The emerging empirical evidence reinforces the need for careful discernment. Cognitive offloading is not inherently harmful, but excessive delegation may weaken intellectual engagement. AI can enhance critical thinking when pedagogically structured, but passive use can displace it. Artificial companionship may alleviate some subjective loneliness, but that does not make artificial interaction equivalent to reciprocal human communion. Algorithms can assist decision-making while simultaneously influencing attention, preferences and behaviour[30].

The Church's pastoral task therefore cannot be merely to teach Catholics how to use AI. It must help them discern how to remain human while using it. That requires preserving spaces

[28] Towards a full presence, 47.
[29] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 99, 112-114.
[30] Risko E, Gilbert S, Cognitive Offloading, Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 20, 676-688

where children memorise rather than merely retrieve; students struggle before requesting assistance; families eat together without screens; friends endure disagreement; communities gather physically; the lonely are visited; the sick are touched; catechists encounter the Word before teaching it; priests pray before preaching; and Christians continue to discover that love is not principally an exchange of information but the gift of oneself to another.

Pope Leo's appeal is therefore profoundly pastoral. Digital culture may multiply connections, yet the human heart continues to require genuine closeness. At the centre of Christianity stands neither an idea nor an algorithm, but an event of embodiment: “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14). That affirmation should remain a decisive Christian criterion for the age of artificial intelligence[31].

The ultimate measure of technological progress is therefore not how closely machines can imitate humanity. It is whether human beings, in creating and using those machines, become more capable of truth, freedom, responsibility, relationship, compassion, communion and love. The question the Church must continually place before the technological age is consequently not merely, “What can artificial intelligence do?” It is the much more demanding question: “What kind of human person are we becoming through what we ask it to do for us?”

[31] Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, 231, 239

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