

## **Pope Leo on Artificial Intelligence: remember we are human**

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Pope Leo's first encyclical was published on 25 May. With the Latin title *Magnifica Humanitas*, it is 'on safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence'.

The Pope recalls the fundamentals of Catholic social thinking: we are made in God's image and that is the basis of each person's dignity – not their wealth or position. There is therefore a radical equality among all people, in contrast to ideologies which base people's value on what they achieve or produce. The common good means that everyone should be able to flourish and that means concentration of wealth and power is undesirable. Subsidiarity means shared responsibility, and participation and solidarity means that we are all connected. Social justice requires particular attention to the poor, the vulnerable, and the excluded.

In light of these principles, the concentrated power and wealth of big tech, which 'monopolizes expertise, data and decision-making authority, involves companies and platforms that define conditions for access, rules of visibility, forms of interaction, and even economic opportunities' is a real problem (71).

Technology has always been part of human history and has done much to improve lives. But technological innovation is never neutral. Does it 'truly help individuals and peoples to become more humane and fraternal, while respecting our common home and future generations?' (85). Participation or exclusion? Protection or exploitation? The enormous amounts of energy and water AI data centres require is a significant concern.

A 'measured and vigilant approach' is needed because machines 'do not undergo experiences, do not possess a body, do not feel joy or pain, do not mature through relationships and do not know from within what love, work, friendship or responsibility mean. Nor do they have a moral conscience' (99).

Pope Leo warns that handing over 'important and sensitive decisions – concerning employment, credit, access to public services' to 'automated systems' is a dangerous step' (102). Here in New Zealand, in the same week the encyclical was published the government supported legislation to allow a significant expansion of automated decision making in the area of social welfare benefits and payments. At the very least, great care is needed.

Recently, too, significant reductions in the public sector workforce have been foreshadowed. Again ministers have enthused (without any concrete detail) about the potential of AI to replace these workers. The Pope notes that 'it is essential that the use of AI, especially when it touches on public goods and fundamental rights, be guided by clear criteria and effective oversight, grounded in participation and subsidiarity' (108).

In Catholic social thinking, work is fundamental to human dignity, and Pope Leo notes that while technology can make work easier, 'the protection of employment opportunities and the irreplaceable role of the individual must remain the general rule' (152). If progress eliminates some jobs then those affected must be supported in the transition.

Let us, Pope Leo asks, remember what it is to be human. ‘No computational system, however sophisticated, can create a heart that gives itself, or a conscience that discerns good from evil’ (233).