

# **THE ENCYCLICAL *MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS*: CONTINUITY/RUPTURE/BRIDGE IN THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH<sup>1</sup>**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the publication of Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnificat Humanitas* (hereafter MH) on 25 May 2026, very few reflections have focused on the central place of the Church's Social Doctrine (hereafter CSD) in this document. The magnificent humanity in question is that defended by the Magisterium and is therefore part of a long social tradition of the Catholic Church. It is the one presented to us by the Holy Scriptures. Every human being is 'created in the image and likeness of God' (Gen 1:26). It is this magnificent humanity of workers defended by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, the 135th anniversary of which the encyclical MH celebrates. It is therefore worth recalling that Pope Leo XIV opens this encyclical letter with two chapters devoted to CSS.

The Jesuit columnist for *America Magazine* wrote, in the 29 May 2026 issue, the following headline: "*A.I. is the headline for 'Magnifica Humanitas,' but Catholic social teaching is its spine*". That is precisely what this is about. While artificial intelligence makes the headlines in Leo XIV's new encyclical, Catholic social teaching forms its backbone. He goes on to state that, in addition to the first two chapters dedicated to Catholic social teaching, the last three chapters of the encyclical are an application of this teaching.

Indeed, the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* marks the beginning of the systematisation of the Church's social teaching: "Through this document, my beloved Predecessor gave impetus to that reflection on society, the economy and politics which we today call the Social Doctrine of the Church." (MH, 3).

Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* is known for its critical view of the social situation of workers during the 19th-century Industrial Revolution, with the dignity of the worker at its core. One hundred and thirty-five years after its publication, Pope Leo XIV signed, on the anniversary of his predecessor's aforementioned encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, focusing on the place of the human person in the age of the digital revolution. Two encyclicals, two Leos, two revolutions, a single objective: the dignity of the human person. Humanity is thus the essential and even existential link connecting the two encyclicals.

In this article, we intend first to show how the defence of human dignity in the digital age forms part of a continuity and has been emphasised under the pontificate of Pope Francis. Next, we will analyse MH from the perspective of the CSD in terms of continuity and rupture, drawing on the first two chapters. Finally, we will show how MH seeks to build bridges in the age of the digital revolution whilst putting into practice the CSD set out in the first two chapters.

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<sup>1</sup> This English version is a translation of the original French article titled "L'ENCYCLIQUE *MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS*: ENTRE CONTINUITÉ/RUPTURE/PASSERELLE DE LA DOCTRINE SOCIALE DE L'ÉGLISE"

## I. POPE FRANCIS' CONCERNS REGARDING THE DIGITAL AGE

One of the documents cited by Leo XIV when he refers to the technological revolution is indeed Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Indeed, in the third chapter of his encyclical, devoted to the human causes of the ecological crisis, Pope Francis takes a critical look at technology in terms of power and authority, and he speaks very clearly of the globalisation of a technocratic paradigm (*Laudato Si'* 106–114). Pope Leo XIV explicitly takes up this analysis in MH 93–96.

One of the highlights of Pope Francis's pontificate was the conference organised in 2019 by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, entitled: 'The Common Good in the Digital Age'. The term "digital age", also known as the "digital revolution" or "digital galaxy"<sup>2</sup>, can be understood by also referring to the concept of "artificial intelligence".

In his message to the participants at this conference, Pope Francis highlights two major problems caused by the digital age: the first is the use of robots in the workplace, and the second is the manipulation of data and information. The use of robots in the workplace is a major concern for humanity as a whole, as "robots could become a purely hyper-efficient tool, used solely to increase profits and yields, and could deprive thousands of people of work, thereby jeopardising their dignity".<sup>3</sup>

The use of artificial intelligence also entails risks linked to the spread of false information, or 'fake news': 'It is possible, as never before, to circulate biased opinions and erroneous data capable of poisoning public debate and even manipulating the opinions of millions of people, to the point of endangering the very institutions that guarantee peaceful civil coexistence.<sup>4</sup> The Holy Father also highlights other changes at a personal level, which make it difficult to recognise and appreciate differences; the majority, who do not have access to artificial intelligence, become consumers; there is inequality because knowledge is concentrated in the hands of a few.

Pope Francis has also raised serious ethical questions regarding the global arms industry. In his view, autonomous weapons could also fall into the wrong hands, where they might be used for terrorist attacks or interventions aimed at destabilising the institutions of legitimate systems of government.

Aware of the challenges outlined above, Pope Francis calls for an ethics to guide the digital age. He notes the development of a new discipline known as the ethics of algorithms or 'algoethics'<sup>5</sup>. The CSD has a major role to play in this process, emphasising the importance of human dignity, justice, subsidiarity and solidarity. The Holy Father calls for renewed reflection on rights and duties in this digital age, as the scale and pace of these developments have given

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Meeting with participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life*, Friday 28 February 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, Address by His Holiness Pope Francis to participants in the seminar 'The Common Good in the Digital Age', Friday 27 September 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, Address to participants in the Congress on the Dignity of the Child in the Digital World, 14 November 2019. See also the work of Luciano Anbrosini, *Algoethics and Algocracy: An Existential Problem* Online:

<https://ambrosinus.altervista.org/blog/algoethics-and-algocracy-an-existential-problem-part-1/>

rise to un d problems and unforeseen situations that challenge our individual and collective ethics<sup>6</sup> .

It is the human person who must be at the centre of development in the digital age: “The concept of human dignity compels us to recognise and respect the fact that a person’s fundamental value cannot be measured by data alone”<sup>7</sup> . In 2014, in his 48th message for World Communications Day, Pope Francis called for a culture of encounter in the digital age: “It is not enough to be mere passers-by on the digital highways, simply ‘connected’; connections must be transformed into genuine encounters.”<sup>8</sup> These challenges are addressed in *Antiqua et Nova*, a document published in January 2025 by the Vatican’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education.

## II. *MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS* AS A CONTINUITY/RUPTURE IN THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

By choosing to open his Encyclical with the CSD, Pope Leo XIV clearly demonstrates that his teaching is part of the continuity of this tradition. The attention he pays to the CSD shows that MH, whilst paying homage to *Rerum Novarum*, is situated within a dynamic of continuity and renewal: Pope Leo XIV does not limit himself to repeating the teachings of his predecessors, but sets himself the task of interpreting them. As he reminds us: “We cannot today be content merely to repeat his precious teachings, but we must ask God for the wisdom needed to interpret the major trends of our age, particularly the progress of technology.” (MH 4).

The first chapter of the encyclical traces the history of the CSD whilst providing a very clear definition. Pope Leo defines CSD as a path of communal discernment arising from the encounter between the eternal truth of the Gospel and the questions of history. In this sense, it is dynamic since “it allows itself to be questioned by the signs of the times; it draws nourishment from the contribution of the sciences, cultures and human experiences” (MH 27). The Catholic Church, together with other Christian denominations and even other religions, becomes the voice of the voiceless wherever the dignity of the human person is violated. Consequently, ‘Social Doctrine becomes a theology of communion in history, a place where the Word made flesh continues to become dialogue, memory and prophecy’ (MH 27).

The origin of the term ‘social doctrine’ dates back to Pope Pius XI and refers to the doctrinal ‘corpus’ dealing with issues relating to our society. However, Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) marks the beginning of a unique development in the Church’s teaching on social matters (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, hereafter CSDC 87). The CSD is a body of work in which we find principles for reflection, criteria for judgement and guidelines for action in our society. It is “reflection on society, the economy and politics” (MH, 3). “The Church’s social teaching is a heritage of wisdom in which we find principles for

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Pontifical Academy for Life, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, Address to participants in the ‘Minerva Dialogues’, Monday 27 March 2023. See also the recent document from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on human dignity, *Dignitas Infinita*, published on 8 April 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, *48th World Day of Social Communications, 2014 – Communications at the service of an authentic culture of encounter*.

thinking, criteria for discernment or judgement, and concrete guidelines for action. It is founded on Sacred Scripture and Tradition.” (MH, 3)

Social Doctrine of the Church has developed over time through the Magisterium’s numerous interventions on social issues, and is found in various documents (ecumenical councils, encyclicals, papal addresses and documents drawn up by the offices of the Holy See) (CSDC 8). The purpose of the CSD is to interpret the social issues of our time and to guide human behaviour (CSDC 72–73). For Pope Leo XIV, the CSD ‘helps us to analyse the challenges of the present with clarity, identifying the appropriate ways to live an authentic Christian witness, in joy and in service to the world. ’ (MH, 3). It is not “a static set of concepts, but a living body of truths that preserves and interprets humanity’s vocation to a full and just life.” (MH 3).

The Holy Father traces the development of the CSD within the Magisterium, which has accompanied the great social transformations from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. He recalls that these fundamental principles are set out in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* as well as in the recent Magisterium. (MH 28).

Indeed, what we call today the CSD “brings together and organises a long tradition of ecclesial reflection on social life, drawing its sources from Sacred Scripture, the Church Fathers, and the theological and juridical developments of both the Middle Ages and the modern era.” The expression “Social Doctrine of the Church” was first used by Pius XII in 1950,[23] but the content it encompasses, understood as an organic *body* of social teachings, began to take shape with Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum novarum* .” (MH 29). The challenges posed by the ‘new issues’ of his time—the conflict between capital and labour, the workers’ question, and economic and social transformations—thus prompted Pope Leo XIII to discern and highlight the causes and possible solutions in the light of the Gospel.

The encyclical letter *Rerum novarum* marks a milestone in the evolution of the social Magisterium. As the founding text of social doctrine, it inaugurates a living tradition which, whilst remaining faithful to the Gospel, is enriched by engagement with the ‘new questions’ of each era. (MH 30). Pope Leo XIV recalls that it is the first major systematic framework of this social doctrine, which the following decades would further develop.

On the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *the Rerum novarum* , Pius XI published the encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* in 1931. We are in the midst of a global economic crisis. This document marks a new stage in the social Magisterium. This encyclical letter does not merely address the labour issue, but also broadens its analysis to encompass the entire economic and political order. It denounces the concentration of economic power in the hands of a minority, criticising both unbridled competition and collectivist projects that suppress the freedom and responsibility of individuals. It firmly reaffirms the workers’ right of association and reiterates that a just wage must take into account not only the work performed, but also the needs of the worker and his family. In this context, it systematically formulates the principle of subsidiarity, which was to become one of the constant guiding principles of Social Doctrine. (MH 31)

Mention must also be made of other interventions by Pius XI, from the encyclicals *Non abbiamo bisogno* and *Mit brennender Sorge* to *Divini Redemptoris*, in which he denounces

totalitarianisms that trample on human dignity, stifle social life, exalt the State beyond its proper place, and resort to the discriminatory notion of race.

In this history of the Social Doctrine of the Church, the Pope reflects on the Christmas radio messages of Pius XII. He recalls that these messages, delivered against the dramatic backdrop of the Second World War, marked the development of the Social Doctrine. In these addresses, the Pope outlines the contours of an international order founded on human dignity, justice and peace. He also opens a dialogue with society based on natural law, understood as a set of objective principles that take precedence over the interests of individuals and states and must govern both the internal life of nations and their mutual relations. (MH 32)

In his historical overview of Social Doctrine, the Holy Father moves on to the *pivotal* years of the Second Vatican Council. Saint John XXIII is described as the visionary who enabled Social Doctrine to reach a decisive milestone. Two encyclicals will be discussed: *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963). These two documents embody what John XXIII called *the 'aggiornamento'*, that is to say, the updating. The pontiff thus committed himself to bringing the Church into a living dialogue with the world. (MH 33).

According to Leo XIV, the Second Vatican Council played an important role in the Church's self-understanding in the contemporary world. He refers in particular to the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the Modern World. The importance of this document lies in the formulation of "the image of a Church that draws close to humanity, engaged in the world, and determined to reflect not on the basis of abstract schemes, but on the basis of the concrete reality of historical situations." (MH 34). It lists a number of concrete realities such as marriage, the family, economic and social life, and the political community.

It is an important conciliar document for the Social Doctrine of the Church insofar as it opens up avenues for thematic reflection, but also in that it provided a method of discernment inviting us to interpret historical transformations with an evangelical perspective and human discernment.

Among the 16 conciliar documents, Leo XIV also cites the Declaration *Dignitatis humanae* in which the "Council recognises that religious freedom is a fundamental right rooted in the dignity of the person, which must be guaranteed by the legal order so that no one is compelled to act against their conscience or prevented from seeking or professing the truth in private and in public.[30]" (MH 34)

Another important encyclical is Paul VI's *Populorum progressio*, in which peace is defined in relation to the integral development of the human person: it is not reduced to the absence of war, but takes shape in the journey towards integral human development. Paul VI thus describes development "as a transition from less human to more human conditions of life" and conceives of it as a process that concerns "every person and the whole person", [31] that is to say, all dimensions of the person's and all peoples, without exception. Development thus becomes "the new name for peace" (MH 35).

In the *Octogesima adveniens*, written for the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Rerum novarum*, Paul VI applies this perspective to post-industrial society, marked by urban transformations, new forms of

poverty, changes in the world of work and rapid cultural shifts that call into question the future of individuals and communities. (MH 36)

In his historical overview of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Pope Leo XIV addresses what he calls the ‘ ‘of the recent *Magisterium*. In it, he presents Saint John Paul II as a figure situated at the crossroads of the crisis of the great ideological systems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the dawn of economic globalisation. He mentions in particular the encyclical *Laborem exercens*, published ninety years after *Rerum novarum*, in which John Paul II initiates a new reflection on work. (MH 37)

The Encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, published on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Populorum progressio*, sees John Paul II returning to the scourge of underdevelopment. Similarly, in the Encyclical *Centesimus annus*, published for the centenary of *Rerum novarum*, he offers an analysis of the collapse of the Soviet system as well as the rise of democracy and the market economy. In it, Saint John Paul II takes up Pius XII’s message that the Church can recognise the value of democracy insofar as it guarantees the effective participation of citizens, allows for the peaceful election and replacement of leaders, and prevents the monopolisation of power by narrow elites driven by particular or ideological interests. (MH 39)

Leo XIV also cites Benedict XVI’s social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, in which the latter takes up and expands upon the concept of development set out in *Populorum Progressio*, whilst placing it within the context of globalisation. He recalls that this development must translate into economic progress that is truly inclusive and respectful of the limits of creation. In this reinterpretation, Benedict XVI places charity at the centre, affirming that it “is the main path of the Church’s social doctrine”, [46] provided that it is always united with the truth” (MH 41).

As for Pope Francis, Leo XIV points out that his teaching follows in the tradition of \**Gaudium et Spes*\*, which invites us to view history through the lens of people’s wounds and hopes and to bring these into dialogue with the Gospel. He cites the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, a veritable roadmap for Francis’s pontificate, as well as his social encyclical *Laudato si*, dedicated to our common home. He also mentions the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, published in a context marked by the breakdown of the social fabric, the “piecemeal world war”, individualistic globalisation and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on community bonds” (MH 44). Finally, he refers to the encyclical *Dilexit nos*, dedicated to the human and divine love of the Heart of Jesus. He thus recalls that the most authentic response to the love of the Heart of Jesus is concrete love for our brothers and sisters.

The second chapter of the Encyclical is devoted to certain foundations and principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church: “I believe that today, to safeguard the human person in the age of artificial intelligence, we must return to a reflection on the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity and social justice. ” (MH 46) These principles are well summarised in Chapter 4 of *the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

At the request of Pope Saint John Paul II in 2004, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace<sup>9</sup> published ‘a comprehensive overview of the fundamental framework of the doctrinal corpus of the social teaching of the Catholic Church’.<sup>10</sup> This is known as the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*.

The human person is at the heart of the CSD<sup>11</sup>. Through its social doctrine, the Church seeks to proclaim the Gospel to the men and women of our society, but also to enrich and permeate society itself with the Gospel (CSDC, 62). CSD is therefore a valid instrument of evangelisation. It draws its inspiration from two main sources: biblical revelation and the tradition of the Church (CSDC 74). It is also described as a ‘work in progress’ where ‘the work is always ongoing, where enduring truth penetrates and permeates new circumstances’ (CSDC 86).

Regarding the foundations, Pope Leo XIV draws on Chapter 3 of the CSDC on the human person and their rights; he cites three foundations: the human being, image of the Triune God (MH 48–50), which is found in numbers 108 to 123 of the CSDC; the equal dignity of all human beings (CSDC 144–148/MH 51–53) and the supreme value of human rights (CSDC 152–159/MH 54–57).

The key principles of the CSD are based on the recognition that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (CSDC 108). The Church sees in every person the image and likeness of God: ‘God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them’ (Genesis 1:27). Since time immemorial, the Church has always taken the defence of human dignity to heart. Issues such as abortion, discrimination, social exclusion, euthanasia and the dignity of workers are linked to the dignity of the human person. Pope Leo XIV adds the adjective ‘Trinitarian’ to the expression ‘image of God’. We are created in the image and likeness of the Triune God, that is to say, of the mystery of the living God, revealed in Jesus Christ as the communion of the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (MH 48). This mystery of God-Love is Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word; he is the source of the CSD.

As for the equal dignity of all human beings, the Pontiff quotes his predecessor Saint John Paul II, who noted with satisfaction a gradual progress in the awareness of respect for the person and their uniqueness in the modern world. However, “It is important to ensure that this growing awareness of human dignity is not overshadowed by the pressure of new ideologies or certain very powerful interests in today’s world.” (MH 51).

The Holy Father forcefully reaffirms that the Church gratefully acknowledges the movement towards the identification and proclamation of human rights. Drawing inspiration from his predecessor Saint John Paul II, he recognises that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one of the highest expressions of human conscience. But we must also recognise that the protection of human rights is exposed to a twofold risk: that of a purely formal declaration,

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<sup>9</sup> The Dicastery for Justice and Peace was incorporated into the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, established by Pope Francis in 2017.

<sup>10</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 9, see [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html)

<sup>11</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 198.

which takes no account of reality, and that of no longer recognising their universality. What are the foundations and fundamental principles of the CSD?

The CSDC highlights a number of principles of the CSD. The dignity of the human person and human rights are the most important, as they form the foundation of all other principles such as: the common good, the universal destination of goods, the preferential option for the poor, subsidiarity, solidarity and participation. All this can only be achieved through love.

MH lists some of these principles. We noted with surprise that the encyclical does not explicitly mention the preferential option for the poor as a principle, but instead refers to the principle of social justice. Is this a deliberate omission or a matter of terminological preference? Let us not forget that the principle of the preferential option for the poor has been the subject of theological debate and continues to be so. However, it has remained a constant in the writings of the Magisterium right up to Pope Francis. Clearly, in the principle of social justice proposed by Pope Leo XIV, there is indeed mention of the ‘preferential option for the poor’ (MH 78). We shall subsequently provide a summary of the content that Leo XIV gives to this principle. Let us now turn to the various principles of MH.

**The Common Good.** This is the very first principle of Social Doctrine of the Church cited by the CSDC. The common good is “the sum of social conditions which allow people, as groups or as individuals, to achieve their fulfilment more fully and more easily”.<sup>12</sup> This is a quotation from *Gaudium et Spes* to which MH refers in paragraph 60. The Holy Father devotes five paragraphs of his Encyclical Letter to this. Pope Leo XIV provides a definition of this principle in relation to human dignity. He describes it “as the social form of the dignity recognised in every person.” (MH 59). Indeed, it is the common good that gives life to a people. The Pontiff defines the people as “a living reality in which individuals learn to recognise themselves as bound to one another and jointly responsible for the *res publica*.” (MH 62).

**The Universal Destination of Goods:** This principle is closely linked to the preceding principle on the common good: “Among the many implications of the common good, the principle of the universal destination of goods is of immediate importance.” (CSDC 171 cited in MH 65) It concerns the well-being of every person and of the person in their entirety. Every human being, created in the image and likeness of God, deserves to enjoy the riches of the earth. There must be no exclusion. God has entrusted the world’s resources to the whole of humankind for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favouring anyone (CSDC, 174). The universal right to use the earth’s goods is based on the principle of the universal destination of goods. Every person must have access to the level of well-being necessary for their full development. Pope Leo XIV devotes three sections to this principle (MH 65–67). We read: “This principle reminds us above all that the earth’s goods – the soil, water, air, natural resources – are given by God to the whole human family to sustain the life of every individual, today as well as for future generations, and that every person has an original right to the use of these goods.” (MH 65).

**Subsidiarity:** The principle of subsidiarity was first emphasised by Pope Pius XI in 1931 in his encyclical on the reconstruction of the social order, *‘Quadragesimo Anno’*. In it, he referred to the relationship between individuals and small groups on the one hand, and larger or national governments on the other. He considered it wrong to take away from individuals what they can

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<sup>12</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, 26.

accomplish through their own initiative in order to give it to the community.<sup>13</sup> The principle of subsidiarity protects people against abuses by higher-level social authorities and calls on those same authorities to help individuals and intermediate groups fulfil their duties (CSDD 187, see MH 68 for the definition of this principle). It opposes certain forms of centralisation, bureaucratisation and social welfare, as well as the unjustified and excessive presence of the State in public mechanisms. It is for this reason that Pope Leo XIV states very clearly that this principle arises from the same vision of the person that guided his reflection on dignity and the common good (MH 68). MH devotes five sections to it (68–72).

**Solidarity:** this principle highlights the interdependence between people. It is closely linked to the principle of human dignity and expresses ‘the need to recognise, within the complex bonds that unite people and social groups, the space granted to human freedom for a common growth in which all take part and to which all contribute. (...) The principle of solidarity demands that the men and women of our time cultivate a keener awareness of the fact that they are indebted to the society of which they are now a part’ (CSDC 194–95/MH 73–76).

**The principle of social justice:** In place of the principle of the preferential option for the poor (CSDC 182–184), the Holy Father proposes the principle of social justice. It should be noted that, in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, the section devoted to the principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church also includes a section on the fundamental values of social life (CSDC 197–203). In this section, the value of justice is the subject of an in-depth analysis (CSDC 201–203). The Compendium recalls that the social Magisterium distinguishes between the classical forms of justice: commutative justice, distributive justice and legal justice. It states:

‘Social justice (...) represents a genuine development of general justice, which regulates social relations on the basis of the criterion of observance of the law. Social justice, a requirement linked to the social question, which today manifests itself on a global scale, concerns the social, political and economic aspects and, above all, the structural dimension of the problems and the solutions associated with them.’ (CSDC 201, §2)

Why does the Holy Father attach such importance to this principle?

Leo XIV considers that the Christian community sees social justice as a concrete way of life in the footsteps of Jesus and of fidelity to his Gospel. (MH 77). This form of justice enables us to recognise the capacity of a social, economic and political order to allow everyone—especially the most vulnerable—to live a dignified life without exclusion. This requires a perspective that begins with the most vulnerable in our society. Social justice serves as a lens through which to recognise social injustices and structures of sin. Social justice is more relevant than ever in the digital age because it “demands that we prevent the emergence of new forms of exclusion and deprivation of liberty: individuals and peoples being denied or restricted access to basic technologies, communities exposed to invasive surveillance, social groups penalised by opaque algorithms that reproduce prejudice and discrimination.” (MH 80)

**The principle of integral human development:** It has not escaped our notice that Pope Leo XIV has adopted the iconic expression “integral human development” from Pope Paul VI as a

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<sup>13</sup>Christine Firer Hinze, ‘Commentary on *Quadragesimo anno* (Forty Years On)’, in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2005), p. 167.

principle of the Social Doctrine of the Church. He explains this principle by referring precisely to the encyclical *\*Populorum progressio\**, which holds that “development is authentic only if it is ‘integral’, that is to say, ‘oriented towards the promotion of every person and the whole person’”<sup>14</sup>. We read:

“In the decades that followed, the Social Doctrine of the Church took up and developed this expression to indicate the concrete way in which the great principles – dignity, the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity, social justice – find their application in history. By ‘integral human development’, we mean a process in which the growth of individuals and peoples concerns all dimensions of existence and opens the future to coming generations” (MH 82).

It is important to note here that Leo XIV links integral human development with integral ecology. For him, a criterion of this principle is integral ecology: “The quality of development is indeed measured by its capacity to reconcile, without separating them, justice towards people and the safeguarding of our Common Home, fostering dignified living conditions, access to necessary goods, just social relations, and care for creation and future generations.” (MH 84). This criterion is therefore the framework through which we can interpret the transformations of our time, including those of the digital revolution. (MH 85)

### **III. THE ENCYCLICAL *MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS*: THE APPLICATION OF CSD AND A BRIDGE-DOCUMENT**

#### **3.1 The Encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*: an application of CSD**

In his analysis of MH, Sam Sawyer, an editorial writer for America Magazine, notes that AI is making headlines in the mainstream media, but that the CSD forms its backbone. He adds that MH offers not only a summary of the CSD, but also a challenge to the Church: to delve deeper into this call to understand, explore and embody this doctrine. In his view, the last three chapters of the encyclical MH put this call into practice<sup>15</sup>. We share Jesuit Sawyer’s view that the last three chapters, whilst making significant advances on other issues (transatlantic slavery, just war), implement CSD.

Chapter 3 of MH addresses certain challenges in the digital age. It is guided by the question of how AI is transforming certain aspects of human life, with serious consequences for human dignity. This reflection is structured around two narratives: that of the building of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9), driven by a project of domination, and that of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem by the prophet Nehemiah (Neh 1–2), which symbolises a work of shared responsibility.

Faced with the challenges of the technocratic paradigm and digital power, Leo XIV, following in the footsteps of his predecessor Paul VI, sounds the alarm: there is a risk that humanity will become a victim of its own conquests. He suggests that “the great principles of Social Doctrine become criteria for evaluating and discerning this new scenario: the inalienable dignity of the person, the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity and social justice.” (MH 96).

<sup>14</sup> Saint Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum progressio* (26 March 1967), n. 14: AAS 59 (1967), p. 264.

<sup>15</sup> Sam Sawyer, “A.I. is the headline for ‘*Magnifica Humanitas*,’ but Catholic social teaching is its spine”, in *America Magazine*, 29 May 2026, online.

Indeed, we cannot regard AI as morally neutral: ethical discernment is required, both in terms of its use and the way in which it is designed (MH 104). From the perspective of AI and the common good, we must open the debate on the ethical code to be adopted; above all, the principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church must serve as criteria for its use, particularly when it affects public goods and fundamental rights. We should therefore draw inspiration from the principles of the universal destination of goods, participation and subsidiarity (MH 108). The principles of the CSD help us to interpret reality (MH 109). Furthermore, developers should be called upon to assume a spiritual and ethical responsibility (MH 111). For any science or technology detached from moral and social progress ultimately turns against humanity (MH 117). We must therefore use the CSD as a guide to conceive of truth as a common good, to protect the human dignity of work and to preserve freedom (MH 131).

In the wake of the tradition inaugurated by Pope Leo XIII, we must fight against all forms of slavery, particularly the new forms of enslavement (MH 174–179). It is worth noting here the Holy Father’s *mea culpa* regarding the transatlantic slave trade. For the first time in history, and in a document of such importance, he asks for forgiveness: “The slave trade must be recognised as a contemporary form of slavery and as a grave violation of human dignity. (...) It is a wound in the Christian memory from which we cannot consider ourselves strangers. [176] It is inevitable to feel deep sorrow when considering the immense suffering and humiliation that slavery has meant for so many people, infinitely loved by the Lord, in contrast to their boundless dignity. For this reason, in the name of the Church, I sincerely ask for forgiveness.” (MH 175–176). To prevent new forms of slavery, a shared responsibility is required.

### 3.2 The Encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*: a bridge-document

At the outset of his letter, the Holy Father poses several questions: ‘Where are we going? Towards what goal do we wish to direct ourselves? Which direction should we choose as a human community and as peoples?’ (MH 6). The Pope answers these questions by drawing on Scripture and the Social Doctrine of the Church. Two biblical icons to answer the question “Quo Vadis Humanitas?”<sup>16</sup>

The Holy Father selects two passages from the Bible which he describes as icons. The first is Gen 11:1–9, which describes the story of the Tower of Babel, and the second is Neh 1–6, concerning the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Two edifying passages, yet they present two different approaches. The first approach is based on human megalomania, which undertakes an oversized project without recourse to God, but is also driven by the dictatorship of groupthink, of standardisation in defiance of differences. We read: “The undertaking seems colossal: a single language, a single technology, a single direction. However, the project conceals a profound trap: it is a work conceived without reference to God, sustained by a uniformity that eliminates diversity and, instead of communion, chooses homogenisation.”

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth recalling here that this expression is the title of the document published on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* by the International Theological Commission, with the approval of Pope Leo XIV. The theme concerns Reflecting on Christian Anthropology in the Face of Certain Scenarios for the Future of Humanity, 9 February 2026. The questions posed by Pope Leo XIV can also be seen in this context. The ITC document, which asks ‘where is humanity heading?’, focuses on the issues of humanism and transhumanism.

(MH, 7). The Pope speaks of the ‘Babel syndrome’, which arises from any undertaking of ‘ , however grandiose, carried out in defiance of human dignity and without God’s blessing.

The second approach, inspired by the prophet Nehemiah (Neh 1–6), is based on dialogue, consultation and collaboration. This is preceded by spiritual preparation, prayer and fasting, and involves different sections of society: “Before taking action, he fasts, prays and intercedes for the people; then he asks the king for permission to return to Jerusalem and, once there, he silently surveys the ruined sites. He does not impose solutions from above. He summons the families, entrusts each with a section of wall to rebuild, listens to their fears, coordinates their efforts, and faces opposition.” (MH, 8).

Of the two paths, the Pope suggests taking the second, that of Nehemiah. It is a path of practising synodality. In other words, we must build on the rock of our relationship with God and of dialogue. It is a matter of “being builders of communion and not architects of Babel; servants of the Kingdom to come and not masters of towers doomed to collapse.” (MH 16).

This image of builders of communion is also symbolised by the expression “building a civilisation of love”, which Leo XIV contrasts with the culture of power in the final chapter of his encyclical. The expression “civilisation of love” was first used by Pope Paul VI in his Pentecost message of 17 May 1970. For Paul VI, Pentecost inaugurates a civilisation of love and peace. He uses this expression in a context marked by the Cold War, the arms race and profound economic imbalances (MH 186).

It is in terms full of hope that the Pope speaks of this civilisation of love: “we glimpse a large part of humanity seeking to remain human and striving to build a city of peace and coexistence.” ” We share the Holy Father’s positive view that a part of humanity still harbours this great desire to remain human, to build a city of peace and to live in peaceful coexistence. This may even be the aspiration of the vast majority, beyond the selfish interests of a few.

Our pastoral ministry in Dublin, Ireland, as well as our meetings and conversations with parishioners, have enabled us to discern the same aspiration as that of the Holy Father: to build a community, a society where people live together in peace. Pope Leo XIV invites us to adopt a holistic vision which translates into a process of building that may be slower and less visible, but better understood and better coordinated, “so as to become the conscious and structured commitment of every community, from the family to the government of states and their relations. It is to this horizon of commitment, to this work of hope, that we give the name ‘civilisation of love’.” (MH 185). We cannot fail to note that the conclusion of the CSDC is entitled “Towards a civilisation of love. ’ This shows that, even though the expression was first used by Paul VI, it was also the subject of reflection in the CSDC. Regarding the civilisation of love, we read: ‘Love must be present in all social relations and permeate them. (...) To make society more human, more worthy of the person, we must restore the value of love in social life — at the political, economic and cultural levels. (...) Only charity can completely transform the human person.’ (CSDC 581–583)

In the context of the digital revolution, Leo XIV invites us to rediscover and reclaim the civilisation of love. He is aware that this is not a naive project, but one that must be built. It is a matter of “translating charity into structures of justice, giving institutional form to fraternity, and regarding the other—whether a person or a people—as a necessary ally in building the

common good.” (MH 186). It is this social love that Pope Francis has strongly emphasised in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. This should become a culture and a norm.

In this process of building bridges, the Holy Father offers an interpretation of history in which men and women have distinguished themselves by opening paths to reconciliation. These are the saints and the righteous, those often-forgotten peacemakers (MH 211). The Pope cites the example of Martin Luther King Jr., as well as the end of apartheid in South Africa thanks to the role played by Nelson Mandela. We also find women such as Saint Laura Montoya, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, Dorothy Day, Marie Skłodowska-Curie, Maria Montessori, Elisabeth Elliot, Wangari Maathai, Benazir Bhutto and so many others, on every continent, who, through their commitment, have helped to make history more human (MH 124).

He also refers to the martyrs of fraternity and justice such as: Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe, Saint Oscar Romero and Blessed Enrique Angelelli, as well as witnesses who embodied, in difficult and often inhuman conditions, the hope of the Gospel and human dignity, such as the Venerable François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận (MH 125).

The building of a civilisation of love is our own responsibility, and each and every one of us has our own sphere of action (MH 212). The Pope suggests some ways to build a civilisation of love: to disarm words (MH 214); to build peace in justice (MH 215); to adopt the perspective of the victims (MH 216); cultivating a healthy realism (MH 218); recognising the need for diplomacy and multilateralism (MH 224–227); and, finally, praying and hoping (MH 228).

## CONCLUSION

The Magnificent Humanity, more than the title of an encyclical letter, is a contemplation of the human person created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). To magnify the human person in the digital age is to rediscover this image of God the Creator in every person. Whilst every revolution entails unforeseeable consequences, it is right to establish an ethical framework—even if this is difficult—to guide not only the revolution itself but also its consequences, and above all the people who are driving it. In the context of AI, developers must bear ethical responsibility. In the encyclical MH, Pope Leo XIV proposes very clearly that the CSD, and more specifically its principles, must serve as criteria for its use.

Furthermore, the central place accorded to the CSD is very evident, as the first two chapters deal not only with its foundations but also with its key principles. We cannot fail to emphasise once again two principles that have particularly caught our attention: social justice and integral human development. We must also highlight the intrinsic relationship between integral human development and integral ecology.

The foundations and principles of the CSD thus enabled Pope Leo XIV to examine not only the challenges facing the human person in the digital age, but also to propose them as a framework for understanding the digital revolution. The CSD can also serve as a bridge to the digital age. It is for this reason that we have devoted the final section of this article to *Magnifica Humanitas* as an application of the CSD, but also as a bridging document.

The encyclical MH very clearly contrasts the culture of power with a civilisation of love. The culture of power and the civilisation of love are guided by two parallel logics: that of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9), which symbolises the construction of a project without God, whose primary aim is domination, and that of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem by Nehemiah

(Neh 1–2), founded on shared responsibility. We are invited to follow Nehemiah’s path and to be builders of bridges between people in today’s world.

The faith of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as expressed in the Magnificat, can serve as an inspiration for us to become “weavers of hope in our world, by sharing who we are and what we have, so that the presence of Jesus may grow among us and his Kingdom take shape.” (MH 245). In this way, the digital age can become a path through which the Spirit brings the civilisation of love to maturity in our lives.

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## ACRONYMS AND THEIR MEANINGS

AI: Artificial Intelligence

CSD: *Church Social Doctrine*

CSDC: *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*

Gn: Genesis

MH: *Magnifica Humanitas*

Ne: Nehemiah

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