



The Hermeneutics of Papal Social Architecture:

Magnifica Humanitas and the Metaphysics of Authentic Fraternity

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Pope Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, analyzing its unconventional structural opening, theological diagnosis of the digital age, and profound geopolitical critique. By deferring the traditional inclusive greeting, the Holy Father underscores an urgent call for a renewed Christian humanism to counter the existential fragmentations of unbridled technological expansion, symbolized by a modern "Babel syndrome." Drawing trajectories from Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate*, Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*, and Augustine's *The City of God*, this study explores how the encyclical reclaims global sovereignty from transnational corporate actors. It highlights the Holy See's historic institutional apology for chattel slavery, which establishes the moral credibility required to critique modern digital exploitation. Finally, integrating the author's extensive research on *fraternitas* as an oblativ, metaphysical reality, this paper confronts the pedagogical challenges of the document's intense density.

It addresses whether a highly conceptual text can find genuine pastoral receptivity among the marginalized—such as the rural poor in Gobabis, Namibia, isolated Indigenous outstations in Santa Teresa, Australia, the township of Mamelodi in Pretoria, South Africa, or a remote neighbourhood in Frederiksted on the Island of Saint Croix. Critically, it frames the ontological chasm between the transcendent human *telos* (the beatific vision of a composite mind, body, soul, and spirit) and the transient, recyclable mechanics of artificial intelligence, ultimately proposing a material transition toward a solidarity economy to restore human dignity within contemporary digital "cities."

Keywords: Papal Social Teaching, Leo XIV, Magnifica Humanitas, Benedict XVI, Authentic Fraternity, Metaphysics of Gift, Pedagogical Deficit, Human Telos, Gobabis (Namibia), Santa Teresa (Australia), Mamelodi (South Africa), Frederiksted (Saint Croix), Solidarity Economy.

Introduction

Throughout Church history, papal documents and pastoral letters have traditionally established their intended audience in the opening salutation. In recent decades, Supreme Pontiffs have typically addressed encyclicals to the global Catholic hierarchy, religious orders, the lay faithful, and "all people of good will." This specific inclusive formula was historically introduced by Pope John XXIII in his landmark 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, signalling a desire to engage the entire human family on issues of global moral urgency.

Pope Leo XIV departs from this established literary and protocol tradition in *Magnifica Humanitas*. Rather than initiating the text with a formal greeting, he immediately immerses the reader into the core theological message of the document. The explicit destination of the letter is deferred until paragraph 16, where he writes: "I address this heartfelt appeal to all the Catholic faithful, to all Christians and to all men and women of goodwill."

In secular and formal correspondence alike, the standard practice requires identifying the recipient at the outset. By placing this inclusive address nearly halfway through the document, the Holy Father introduces an unusual structural shift that disrupts conventional ecclesiastical drafting norms, prioritizing the immediate delivery of a profound diagnostic mandate over standard protocol.

Theological Diagnosis and the Metaphysics of Authentic Fraternity

Within the introduction of *Magnifica Humanitas*, the text establishes key thematic identifiers to diagnose the existential crisis of the digital age: namely, the critical deficit of authentic fraternity and the urgent need to protect integral human dignity. To counter these modern anxieties, the Holy Father advocates for a robust, contemporary Christian humanism.

This pastoral strategy mirrors the theological framework utilized by Pope Benedict XVI in his 2009 social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. Navigating the global financial and economic crisis of that era, Benedict XVI proposed that "the greatest service to development, then, is a Christian humanism" (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 78). In the face of a fragmented, hyper-globalized world, Benedict XVI famously challenged humanity to transcend the mere transactional proximity of being "neighbours" in order to become true brothers and sisters rooted in a shared, God-given nature. Where Benedict XVI sought to dismantle the barriers of race, language, and nationality erected by globalization, Leo XIV builds upon this trajectory by invoking the biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel (cf. Genesis 11:1–9) to illustrate the existential fragmentation threatened by unbridled technological expansion.

As I have extensively demonstrated in my work *Authentic Fraternity*, the notion of *fraternitas* cannot be left to abstract secular ideals or mere social coexistence. It requires an exact Christological and metaphysical grounding. True fraternity is anchored in a shared spiritual kinship and the Paternity of God, which raises human relations above the level of sterile, utilitarian networks into true actuality. When *fraternitas* is severed from *gratia* (grace) and *communio* (communion), it collapses into a restrictive, tribal, or nationalistic brotherhood with boundaries—a modern recurrence of the Platonic *barbaros* framework or the historical tragedies of localized ethno-political exclusions. Consequently, *Magnifica Humanitas* applies this deeper metaphysical framework of fraternity to the unprecedented acceleration of artificial intelligence. Pope Leo XIV contextualizes this generational responsibility by asserting:

"Each generation inherits the task of shaping its own era, of guiding history to become a place where the dignity of every person is safeguarded, justice is promoted and fraternity is made possible" (*Magnifica Humanitas*, no. 2).

Crucially, the text avoids a technophobic posture, acknowledging that technological innovation is an intrinsic facet of the human experience. As the Holy Father notes:

“In recent years, it has become increasingly evident how rapidly and profoundly digitalization, artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics are transforming our world. Technology should not be considered, in itself, as a force antagonistic to humanity. On the contrary, it has formed part of our history since the beginning as ‘a profoundly human reality, linked to the autonomy and freedom of man’” (*Magnifica Humanitas*, no. 4).

This document serves as an active pastoral response to the signs of the times, positioning the Church as an authoritative and deeply relevant voice in the contemporary world. Recognizing this historical juncture as a distinct *Kairos* moment—a time of supreme spiritual and moral consequence—the Church exercises its divinely instituted teaching office to guide secular society. In doing so, the magisterium exercises its voice in accordance with the Pauline theology of governance, recalling that all legitimate moral and pastoral authority ultimately derives from God (cf. Romans 13:1).

The Shift in Global Sovereignty: Technology, Slavery, and the *Societas Imperfecta*

Beyond the theological restoration of Christian humanism, Pope Leo XIV offers a profound structural diagnosis of modern global governance. In the fifth paragraph of the encyclical, the Holy Father highlights a critical historical shift: whereas technological innovation was previously guided and directed primarily by the sovereign State, contemporary progress is driven by private, transnational entities. These corporate actors possess resources and intervention capabilities that far surpass the governance structures of many sovereign nations.

This geopolitical reality naturally recalls the classical ecclesiological distinction between the *societas perfecta* (perfect society) and the *societas imperfecta* (imperfect society).

In this traditional framework, the State is understood as a *societas imperfecta* because its domain is limited to temporal power and it lacks the inherent moral architecture to sustain itself. Conversely, the Church is understood as a *societas perfecta* by virtue of its divine mandate and spiritual authority, which are independent of temporal fluctuations. In *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger explicitly addresses this institutional limitation, arguing that the modern state inherently remains a *societas imperfecta* (Ratzinger 2008:145). Because the state lacks an internal moral architecture capable of sustaining its own democratic and legal structures, it permanently relies on an external spiritual entity—namely, the Church—to illuminate and infuse the foundational moral forces that the political order cannot generate from within its own structural depths (cf. Ratzinger 2008:145).

While Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau historically rejected this dependency—arguing instead that the Church, much like an absolute monarchy, acts as a corrupting force that enslaves human freedom—Leo XIV demonstrates that without the moral intervention of the Church, unbridled systems of power inevitably generate new forms of human subjugation. Crucially, Pope Leo XIV reinforces the Church's authority to speak on these modern systemic abuses by courageously confronting the Holy See's own historical failures. In a groundbreaking passage within *Magnifica Humanitas*, Leo XIV issues an explicit institutional apology for the Vatican's historic role in legitimizing chattel slavery. He openly acknowledges that during the early modern period, the Apostolic See succumbed to the pressures of temporal sovereigns by issuing papal bulls that regulated and validated the subjugation and enslavement of non-Christians. Calling this historical delay in condemning the slave trade a “wound in Christian memory,” the Holy Father notes that it took the Church eighteen centuries to explicitly recognize the absolute incompatibility of slavery with human dignity.

Pastorally, this institutional examination of conscience is not merely a historical retrospective. By asking for pardon for the Church's past complicity with colonial powers, Leo XIV establishes the moral credibility required to critique the new technocratic paradigm. The encyclical draws a direct parallel between the 15th-century sovereign exploitation of human beings and the 21st-

century corporate exploitation of human data. By admitting that the Church was once slow to recognize how systems of power could codify human subjugation, Leo XIV warns modern society against repeating this error by blindly optimizing human beings into passive components of digital, algorithmic systems. The apology serves as a powerful magisterial warning: just as the state remains a *societas imperfecta* prone to moral blindness, unregulated technological monopolies risk creating new, sophisticated systems of digital slavery if they are not actively disarmed by the moral forces of the Gospel.

The Universal Destination of Goods, The Pedagogical Deficit, and the Ontological Limits of Machine Reality

This warning against corporate extraction leads directly to Leo XIV's economic re-evaluation of modern technological property. In paragraph 66 of *Magnifica Humanitas*, the Holy Father vigorously reasserts the traditional Catholic doctrine of the "universal destination of goods," explicitly reminding the global community that "the Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable".

Leo XIV applies this ancient principle to the digital age by expanding the definition of universal goods to include assets once considered exclusively private property: patents, algorithms, digital platforms, and data infrastructure. Because these technologies are derived from collective human knowledge and natural resources, their concentration in the hands of a few transnational monopolies constitutes a form of economic dispossession against the global poor.

This magisterial expansion aligns seamlessly with the *logic of gift* and *gratuitousness* explored in *Authentic Fraternity*. In *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI asserted that the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift must find their place within normal economic activity to counter purely transactional, anthropocentric models. True economic justice can never be reduced to optional philanthropic charity. If algorithms and data infrastructure are derived from the cosmic store of human collaboration, their structural containment by tech monopolies demands an active, restorative conversion. However, as I have argued in Chapter Five of *Authentic Fraternity* regarding the dense, intimidating nature of Benedict's text, there remains a persistent hermeneutical problem regarding the linguistic and intellectual execution of these expansive social encyclicals. We must honestly confront whether a highly dense, conceptually demanding text like *Magnifica Humanitas* can find actual receptivity in remote areas where the education systems are under-resourced, particularly regarding digital and classical literacy.

Furthermore, this pedagogical breakdown is not confined to the so-called 'developing territories'; even within the Global North, modern education systems frequently fail to equip students with the philosophical or metaphysical categories required to digest this level of magisterial reading. Consequently, there is an acute danger that the text's vital critique of technocracy will be perceived as an insular dialogue intended only for an elite, highly sophisticated class of engineers, computer scientists, and academics.

If this document cannot transcend the walls of advanced universities and corporate boardrooms, does it truly fulfil its universal destination? Does it speak to, or protect, the simple layperson navigating life in a remote, marginalized community? Consider a village in Gobabis, Namibia, or an isolated Indigenous outstation like Santa Teresa in the Australian Outback. This diagnostic question remains equally stark when applied to the urban peripheries of the global south, such as the township of Mamelodi in Pretoria, South Africa, or even within the hidden pockets of systemic isolation in the West, including a remote, economically marginalized neighbourhood in Frederiksted on the island of Saint Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

If the text remains conceptually unapproachable to the very communities displaced by tech-capital extraction, the Church risks undercutting its own pastoral mission. The proclamation

of *fraternitas* must be matched by a deliberate, contextual catechesis that translates high technocratic critique into concrete local parameters.

This communication gap reveals an even deeper ideological crisis embedded within the technology itself: the dangerous cultural assumptions concerning artificial intelligence and its place in creation. Any authentic Christian humanism must assert that technological systems must respect human dignity and never attempt to replace God or God's creation. The human person, uniquely composed of a unified mind, body, soul, and spirit, is designed with a transcendent calling—the eternal destination of the beatific vision. This absolute *telos* is something that artificial intelligence can neither aspire to nor achieve.

Robotics and digital algorithms belong strictly to the earthly, temporal world, not to the eternal or the immortal. When a human person dies, there is an eternal destination for the immortal soul, an enduring value guaranteed by the resurrection. Conversely, for even the most complex mechanical or algorithmic tool, there exists nothing more than a temporal lifespan ending in a basic recycling process or the mere discarding of its physical components. To treat AI as an autonomous moral agent or a replacement for divine wisdom is to succumb to the ultimate illusion of the Earthly City, reducing the sacred mystery of human personhood to recyclable hardware.

This precisely mirrors the operational mission shared within my own community family at the Francesco Collaborative. Our Executive Director, Felipe Witchger, continually challenges us to shift our fundamental perspective on impact capital and asset stewardship by embracing a clear mandate: "Our job is to restore to the poor what belongs to them." Within this framework, aligning investment strategies with Catholic Social Teaching means recognizing that structural economic conversion requires active restitution. True fraternity cannot exist where data and capital are used as tools of technocratic dominance; instead, we are called to actively dismantle these digital enclosures and restore back to vulnerable communities—from urban centres to rural Namibia and remote Australia—the ownership, dignity, and agency that are rightfully theirs.

The Digital Frontier and the Two Augustinian Cities

This vision of radical restitution and structural transformation ultimately serves a greater teleological purpose: the cultivation of a peaceful, just, and unified human community. In paragraph 10 of *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo XIV bridges this socio-economic mandate with classical theology by stating that this "vision of grace is an invitation for us Christians to work together in order to foster a peaceful, just and dignified life in community within today's 'cities'". By placing the word "cities" in quotes, the Holy Father explicitly evokes the dualistic architecture of St. Augustine's masterpiece, *The City of God*. For Augustine, human history is defined by the perpetual tension between two co-mingled realities: the *Civitas Terrena* (the Earthly City, or City of Man), driven by *amor sui* (self-love to the point of contempt for God) and characterized by the *libido dominandi* (the lust for domination), and the *Civitas Dei* (the City of God), driven by *amor Dei* (love of God to the point of forgetting oneself) and characterized by grace and true communion.

By analysing the digital ecosystem through this Augustinian lens, it becomes evident that the modern rush to monopolize artificial intelligence is the contemporary manifestation of the City of Man. This technocratic paradigm is plagued by what Leo XIV diagnoses as the "Babel syndrome"—a profound collective hubris where humanity attempts to engineer an autonomous, algorithmic tower of absolute control and self-deification, entirely detached from moral constraints. The "Babel syndrome" represents the ultimate obsession of the City of Man: reducing the human person to extracted data points to maximize transactional wealth and technocratic dominance.

Leo XIV's use of "cities" reminds us that the digital sphere is not a morally neutral vacuum, but rather the newest battleground where these two cities collide. The Christian vocation in the 21st century is therefore fundamentally Augustinian: we are called to inject the moral forces of grace into the contemporary earthly city, preventing our digital "cities" from collapsing into automated centres of exploitation, and instead transforming them into spaces where authentic fraternity can truly dwell.

Building the City of God Through the Solidarity Economy

To prevent our modern digital cities from becoming monuments to the pride of Babel, this Augustinian theology must find concrete, material expression. It cannot remain an abstract intellectual exercise. Materializing this framework requires actively dismantling our participation in the predatory, extractive financial networks of the City of Man. Instead, we are called to reallocate capital toward a solidarity economy rooted fundamentally in love of neighbour, the common good, and the preservation of our common home.

Where the technocratic City of Man uses algorithms and capital to fence in knowledge and exploit vulnerability for asymmetric gain, a truly Augustinian and Franciscan approach demands that we use our resources to construct the City of God here and now. By holding our financial strategies in direct dialogue with Catholic Social Teaching, impact organizations answer Pope Leo XIV's call to dismantle modern structures of digital slavery. This is done by investing in enterprise models that democratize technology, support community ownership, and respect the absolute dignity of human labour. This is how these organizations operationalize the universal destination of goods in the 21st century: they disrupt the architectural pride of Babel by building digital and financial systems that serve the human person rather than dominate them, establishing authentic fraternity as the foundational cornerstone of our contemporary "cities."

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