

Pope Leo calls for AI disarmament

Pope Leo's new call for the disarmament of AI is not a demand to discontinue its development, but to regulate AI robustly so it only serves the common good.

BY JAMES LORENZ

In the first landmark publication of his papacy, Pope Leo XIV addressed recent advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) by focusing on the threat it poses to workers, social justice and "the dignity of persons".

Presenting his first papal encyclical, "Magnifica Humanitas" ("Magnificent Humanity"), at the Vatican on May 25, Leo declared: "AI needs to be disarmed."

In the document, comprising around 42,300 words in its English translation, the pope writes: "To disarm does not mean rejecting technology, but preventing it from dominating humanity."

Encyclicals are exceptionally important papal documents that respond to the most pressing social issues of the time. Typically written as letters to all bishops and archbishops, they have become a crucial vehicle for disseminating the theology and political commitments of the Roman Catholic Church across the world.

Leo chose to sign his first encyclical on

May 15, the exact anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's "Rerum novarum" ("Of new things"). This famous encyclical, which responded to the technological advances of the industrial revolution, became the foundational document of all modern Catholic social teaching.

Indeed, the current pope probably chose the name Leo because of Leo XI-II's renowned commitment to social justice.

Just as "Rerum novarum" responded to the industrial revolution by emphasising workers' rights and the dignity of human labour, so too Leo XIV has responded to the explosion of AI technology by emphasising the importance of human over machine intelligence.

In 1891, Leo XIII wrote: "Wage-earners... should be specially cared for and protected by the government."

Leo XIV now makes similar appeals to world governments about AI: "It is necessary to establish adequate regulatory tools capable of upholding justice and curbing the distorting effects of technological power."

The current pope follows a long tradition of Catholic engagement with new tech - from concerns about the impact of the printing press in the 15th century to the rise of the internet over 500 years later.

Leo XIV's presentation was preceded by a short film which juxtaposed images of previous popes with major technological innovations. Radio towers gave way to images of broadband centres; early computers to a sea of people

holding up their smartphones in St Peter's Square, Vatican City.

Perhaps the crucial theme of this video was the connection between technology and war. Pictures of second world war aircraft were intercut with the dropping of the atomic bomb, soon followed by images of the 9/11 attacks.

In the encyclical, Leo warns: "The growing ease with which autonomous weapons systems can be deployed makes war more 'feasible' and less subject to human control."

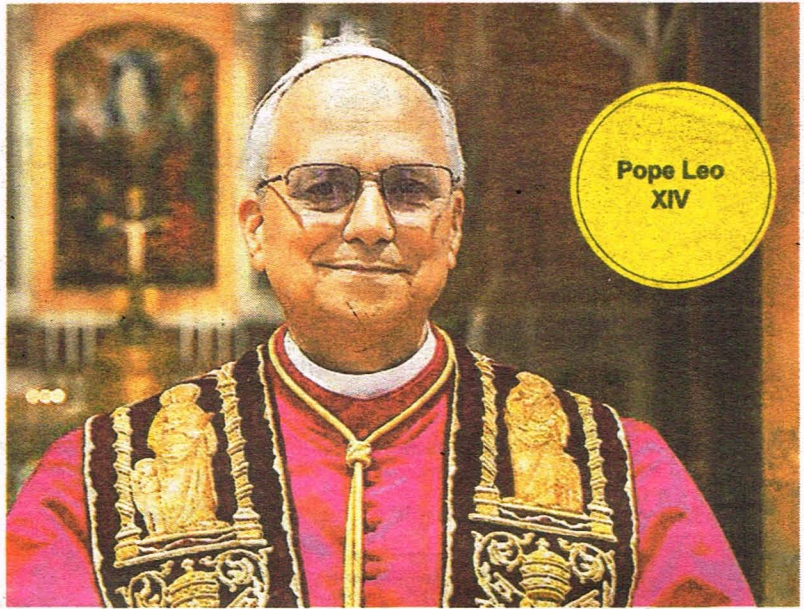
Call for disarmament

Leo XIV isn't the first pope to address the potential threat posed by AI technology. In January 2025, his predecessor Francis signed off the doctrinal note "Antiqua et nova" ("Ancient and new"), which called for AI technology "to include the least of our brothers and sisters, the vulnerable and those most in need".

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In this, the pope drew an analogy with the nuclear disarmament movement, suggesting that both nuclear and AI technologies should only be developed for the good of humanity, and never used as weapons.

Those invited to offer their thoughts on Leo's encyclical included Christopher Olah, the Canadian billionaire and co-founder of AI firm Anthropic. The appearance of



Olah marks the first time a speaker entirely outside clerical or theological circles has been included in such a presentation.

Anthropic is currently locked in a legal dispute with the US government regarding the military application of its AI systems. Leo's encyclical underlines his concerns about the escalation of war around the world, stating: "It is important to reaffirm that the 'just war' theory, which has all too often been used to justify any kind of war, is now outdated."

Olah echoed Leo's demands for

greater social justice around the use of AI, stating: "His Holiness's call for disarmament is profoundly timely."

He called for people working outside computer science to contribute to AI governance and ethics, people "beyond the incentives" of financial markets "who can see what we, from the inside, cannot".

Leo answered Olah by saying: "In the name of the Church, I accept your invitation to walk together; to listen and to speak and together, to find the way for humanity in this time of artificial intelligence."