

WHEN THE WORD BECOMES FLESH

ORGANIZED RELIGION, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE,
AND THE PRIMORDIAL TEST OF LIFE-COHERENCE

*A Maturana-Informed Reading of
Pope Leo XIV's Magnifica Humanitas*

BABEL

Power without
communion.
Control without
relation.

NEHEMIAH

Shared repair
in living relation.
Justice. Dignity.
The common good.

A LIFE-COHERENT FRAMEWORK
FOR RELIGION, TECHNOLOGY, AND CIVILIZATION



HUMAN DIGNITY
The Measure



BIOLOGY OF LOVE
The Foundation



SOCIAL DOCTRINE
The Discernment



ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE
The Environment



DIGITAL CIVIL
COMMONS
The Horizon



CIVILIZATION
OF LOVE
The Goal

DR. BICHARA SAHELY

BSc Biology, MBBS, DM Internal Medicine

ACADEMIC WHITE PAPER

MAY 2026

When the Word Becomes Flesh

Organized Religion, Artificial Intelligence, and the Primordial Test of
Life-Coherence

A Maturana-Informed Reading of Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas*

Academic White Paper

Dr. Bichara Sahely

BSc Biology, MBBS, DM Internal Medicine
St. Kitts and Nevis

25 May 2026

Author Note

This white paper forms part of an ongoing life-coherence inquiry into the conditions under which persons, institutions, technologies, and civilizations preserve, restore, or diminish life-capacity. It reads Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas* through a Maturana-informed lens, bringing Catholic Social Doctrine, the biology of love, artificial intelligence ethics, institutional repentance, and the civil commons into a single diagnostic frame.

The paper does not attempt a comprehensive comparative study of all organized religions. Rather, it uses the Catholic case — especially *Magnifica Humanitas*, its retrieval of Catholic Social Doctrine, and its treatment of slavery — as a paradigmatic example of how religious institutions can become either life-coherent or life-blind. Its broader institutional claims are offered analogically and heuristically, not as exhaustive comparative conclusions.

Suggested Citation

Sahely, B. (2026). *When the word becomes flesh: Organized religion, artificial intelligence, and the primordial test of life-coherence—A Maturana-informed reading of Pope Leo XIV's Magnifica Humanitas*. Academic white paper.

Abstract

Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas* frames the age of artificial intelligence as a civilizational construction site in which humanity must choose between constructing Babel and rebuilding Jerusalem. This white paper offers a Maturana-informed, life-coherent reading of that architecture. It argues that the AI crisis reveals a broader institutional danger: word, doctrine, code, system, authority, reputation, profit, or power can become detached from embodied life. When this occurs, living persons are subordinated to abstraction. When the correction occurs, institutional claims become flesh as mercy, justice, mutual legitimacy, repentance, and shared repair.

By **life-coherence**, this paper means the alignment of persons, institutions, technologies, and systems with the preservation, restoration, and expansion of life-capacity across embodied, relational, social, ecological, and spiritual dimensions. The paper uses the Catholic case — especially *Magnifica Humanitas*, Catholic Social Doctrine, and the encyclical's treatment of slavery — as a paradigmatic example of how organized religion can become either life-coherent or life-blind. It does not claim to offer a comprehensive comparative study of religion, but it suggests that the argument may apply analogically to other traditions and institutions.

The paper's central question is Maturanan: **What way of living does this institution conserve?** Drawing on Maturana's biology of cognition and biology of love, the paper interprets institutions as conserving patterns of coexistence. Babel names any institutional pattern that conserves control without communion; Nehemiah names shared repair in living relation. This distinction applies to AI because AI is not a living observer or moral subject, but it can become a moral environment when institutions delegate classification, visibility, prediction, decision-making, and authority to non-living systems.

The paper also offers a careful life-coherent reading of the Christian phrase "the Word became flesh." It does not deny the ontological priority of the Logos in Christian confession. Rather, it argues that the Logos is epistemically accessible to human beings through embodied life, historical relation, vulnerability, and love. The Word becomes flesh when truth becomes mercy, doctrine becomes justice, authority becomes service, and memory becomes repentance.

Finally, the paper treats the encyclical's slavery passage as an ethical hinge. Without flattening the historical specificity and bodily horror of chattel slavery, it argues that the passage reveals the danger of institutional delay, moral blindness, and legitimized domination. The encyclical's extension of the universal destination of goods to algorithms, platforms, technological infrastructure, and data then opens the way toward a digital civil commons. The paper concludes that religion is life-coherent when its word becomes flesh, technology is life-coherent when its code remains answerable to flesh, and civilization is life-coherent when power becomes service.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence; organized religion; *Magnifica Humanitas*; Pope Leo XIV; Humberto Maturana; Catholic Social Doctrine; life-coherence; biology of love; autopoiesis; Word became flesh; Babel; Nehemiah; digital colonialism; slavery; institutional repentance; civilization of love; human dignity; digital civil commons.

Executive Summary

This white paper asks a simple but demanding question: **What way of living does an institution conserve?** It develops this question through a Maturana-informed, life-coherent reading of Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas*, an encyclical that frames the age of artificial intelligence as a choice between Babel and Nehemiah. Babel names a project of power without communion; Nehemiah names shared repair in living relation. The encyclical's claim that technology is not neutral, because it takes on the characteristics of those who devise, finance, regulate, and use it, provides the theological-social foundation for this inquiry.

The paper proposes that the AI crisis reveals a broader institutional crisis. Powerful institutions — including religious, technological, economic, legal, political, educational, medical, and scientific institutions — can become life-blind when their word, code, doctrine, law, ritual, policy, or system becomes detached from embodied life. The paper therefore uses the Catholic case as a paradigmatic example, not as a total comparative account of organized religion. Its aim is to ask how institutions become life-coherent or life-blind, and how they may be converted from Babel toward Nehemiah.

This requires a primordial corrective. Governance, regulation, doctrine, law, and institutional reform are necessary, but they are not primordial enough. Before governance, there is living. Before policy, there is relation. Before doctrine, there is embodied encounter. Before AI deployment, there is a way of living already being conserved.

Maturana's biology of cognition and biology of love gives the paper its operational center. Human beings bring forth worlds through embodied living, emotioning, languaging, and recurrent coordinations of action. Love, in Maturana's sense, is not sentimentality but the relational domain in which the other appears as a legitimate other in coexistence. This gives rise to the life-coherent institutional test:

Does this institution expand or restrict the domain in which the other appears as a legitimate other?

The paper applies this question to organized religion and AI. Religion becomes life-coherent when doctrine becomes mercy, authority becomes service, memory becomes repentance, ritual

becomes formation in love, and truth becomes communion. Religion becomes life-blind when it places disembodied word above wounded flesh. AI becomes life-coherent when code remains accountable to living persons, dignified work, truth, freedom, justice, participation, and the common good. AI becomes life-blind when persons are reduced to data, risk, prediction, attention, labor inputs, or performance.

The encyclical's apology for the Church's historical complicity and delay regarding slavery becomes a central hinge of the paper. It shows that religious institutions can possess doctrines of dignity while failing to recognize domination in time. Institutional repentance is therefore not weakness; it is a form of life-coherent intelligence. The same memory must now be directed toward digital colonialism, data extraction, hidden labor, and new forms of slavery.

The final conclusion is that the AI crisis reveals a deeper institutional crisis. Humanity does not remain human by regulating machines alone. It remains human by transforming the ways of living that institutions conserve.

Epigraph

The Word becomes flesh, or Babel returns.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Keywords.....	4
Executive Summary	4
Epigraph	5
List of Figures	7
1. Introduction: The Construction Site of Our Time	8
2. Method: A Life-Coherent Hermeneutic of Institutions	10
3. Babel and Nehemiah as Civilizational Diagnostics	11
4. The Primordial Corrective: Living Before System.....	13
5. When Word Detaches from Flesh: The Religious Inversion.....	14
6. When Code Detaches from Life: The Technological Inversion	15
7. Slavery, Digital Colonialism, and Institutional Repentance.....	16
8. Social Doctrine as Discernment of Coexistence	17
9. The Digital Civil Commons	18
10. The Civilization of Love as a Conserved Way of Living.....	19
11. The Life-Coherence Test for Institutions.....	20
12. The Word Becomes Flesh or Babel Returns.....	21
13. Seven Theses	22
14. Conclusion: The Primordial Test of Life-Coherence.....	23
Appendix A — Master Diagram Caption.....	24
Appendix B — Seven Theses: Quick Reference.....	24
Appendix C — Operational Diagnostic: The Life-Coherence Test.....	25
Appendix D — Glossary of Key Terms	26
Acknowledgements	28
Author Bio.....	28
Back Cover Synopsis.....	28
References	29

List of Figures

Figure 1. When the Word Becomes Flesh: The Primordial Test of Life-Coherence	12
--	----

1. Introduction: The Construction Site of Our Time

Artificial intelligence is usually framed as a technological problem, a regulatory challenge, an economic disruption, or a security risk. These framings are necessary, but they do not reach the primordial layer. AI does not enter a neutral world. It enters a world already shaped by institutions, desires, fears, incentives, speech-patterns, exclusions, histories, markets, militaries, and systems of power. It does not merely perform tasks; it reorganizes attention, labor, communication, memory, visibility, authority, and imagination.

Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas* recognizes this depth. It opens by placing humanity before a pivotal civilizational choice: either to construct a new Tower of Babel or to build the city in which God and humanity dwell together. The document then interprets the digital age through the contrast between Babel and Nehemiah: technology as domination, uniformity, and self-assertion, or technology as shared repair, plurality, and fraternal coexistence (Leo XIV, 2026).

This white paper accepts that framing and extends it. The AI question reveals a deeper institutional question: what happens when word becomes detached from flesh? What happens when doctrine, code, system, law, ritual, authority, ideology, or institutional reputation stands above embodied life?

The danger is not limited to technology. Organized religion can also become Babel when it places disembodied word above living persons. AI can become Babel when it places disembodied code above embodied dignity. Politics, economics, law, education, medicine, and science can do the same when their systems cease to remain answerable to life.

By **life-coherence**, this paper means the alignment of persons, institutions, technologies, and systems with the preservation, restoration, and expansion of life-capacity across embodied, relational, social, ecological, and spiritual dimensions. A life-coherent institution does not merely preserve itself, defend its authority, or optimize its procedures. It expands the conditions under which living persons, communities, and the wider web of life can flourish without being reduced to instruments, abstractions, data points, functions, or disposable means.

The central question is therefore not only, "What can AI do?" nor even "How should AI be governed?" It is more primordial:

What way of living does this institution conserve?

This question is Maturanan in spirit. Human beings bring forth worlds through embodied living, emotioning, languaging, and recurrent coordinations of action. Institutions are not merely structures; they conserve patterns of living. They stabilize distinctions, roles, hierarchies, exclusions, rituals, attentions, memories, and futures.

A religious institution conserves a way of speaking of the sacred. A technological institution conserves a way of designing and deploying power. An economy conserves a way of valuing. A legal system conserves a way of recognizing harm. A school conserves a way of becoming human.

The life-coherent test is whether these conserved ways of living help persons and communities flourish, or whether they subordinate living persons to abstractions.

This paper does not attempt a comprehensive comparative study of all organized religions. Rather, it uses the Catholic case — especially Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas*, its retrieval of Catholic Social Doctrine, and its historically significant treatment of slavery — as a paradigmatic example of how religious institutions can become either life-coherent or life-blind. The argument may apply analogically to other religious traditions and institutions, but such application requires careful contextual interpretation. The immediate aim is more focused: to ask what the Catholic case reveals about the broader institutional danger of allowing word, doctrine, code, law, authority, reputation, or system to become detached from embodied life.

2. Method: A Life-Coherent Hermeneutic of Institutions

This paper proceeds by a **life-coherent hermeneutic of institutions**. It asks not only whether an institution is internally coherent, legally valid, doctrinally correct, technologically efficient, economically productive, or politically stable. It asks whether that institution remains answerable to embodied life.

The method is built from three converging sources.

First, *Magnifica Humanitas* provides the theological-social architecture. It frames the age of AI as a choice between Babel and Nehemiah: between technological power that sacrifices dignity to efficiency and shared rebuilding that restores fraternal coexistence. The encyclical explicitly states that technology is not neutral in practice because it takes on the characteristics of those who devise, finance, regulate, and use it (Leo XIV, 2026).

Second, Catholic Social Doctrine provides the normative grammar: human dignity, the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity, social justice, integral human development, truth, work, freedom, peace, and the civilization of love. *Magnifica Humanitas* describes Social Doctrine not as a rigid handbook, but as a process of shared discernment born from the encounter between the Gospel and history. It even calls it a “theology of communion in history” (Leo XIV, 2026).

Third, Maturana provides the primordial biological-relational corrective. Institutions do not simply hold beliefs or execute functions. They conserve ways of living. Human beings bring forth worlds through embodied relation, emotioning, languaging, and recurrent coordination of action. Therefore, the deepest institutional question is not only what a system says, produces, regulates, or optimizes, but what mode of coexistence it stabilizes.

The methodological question of the paper is therefore:

What way of living does this institution conserve, and does that way of living allow the other to appear as a legitimate other in coexistence?

This question is intentionally broader than AI ethics. The AI crisis exposes a deeper civilizational pattern: living persons are repeatedly subordinated to abstract systems that claim authority over them.

3. Babel and Nehemiah as Civilizational Diagnostics

The genius of *Magnifica Humanitas* lies in its symbolic economy. Babel and Nehemiah are not decorative biblical references. They are civilizational diagnostics.

Babel names the project of power without communion. It is the temptation to build a single system, a single tower, a single language, a single technological order, and a single name. Its danger is not coordination as such, but coordination severed from humility, plurality, listening, and God. In the encyclical, Babel becomes the image of technological domination: the idolatry of profit, the sacrifice of the weak, uniformity that neutralizes difference, and the pretense that even a digital language can translate the mystery of the person into data and performance (Leo XIV, 2026).

Nehemiah names another way. It begins not with domination but with grief, prayer, listening, and inspection. It does not impose a total plan from above; it distributes responsibility. Each person and group receives a section of the wall. The city is rebuilt through shared labor, shared vulnerability, and shared purpose. Nehemiah represents the rebuilding of relationships before the rebuilding of walls (Leo XIV, 2026).

These are not merely two biblical scenes. They are two ways of conserving life.

Babel conserves control. Nehemiah conserves shared repair.

Babel treats plurality as a threat. Nehemiah treats plurality as a resource.

Babel makes the person legible to the system. Nehemiah makes the system answerable to persons.

Babel reduces mystery to performance. Nehemiah restores relation through responsibility.

The AI age is therefore not primarily a test of technical capability. It is a test of civilization's conserved emotional-relational field. AI will amplify whichever world brings it forth. If it is built in fear, rivalry, extraction, and domination, it will conserve Babel. If it is built in humility, justice, truth, subsidiarity, solidarity, and love, it may serve Nehemiah.

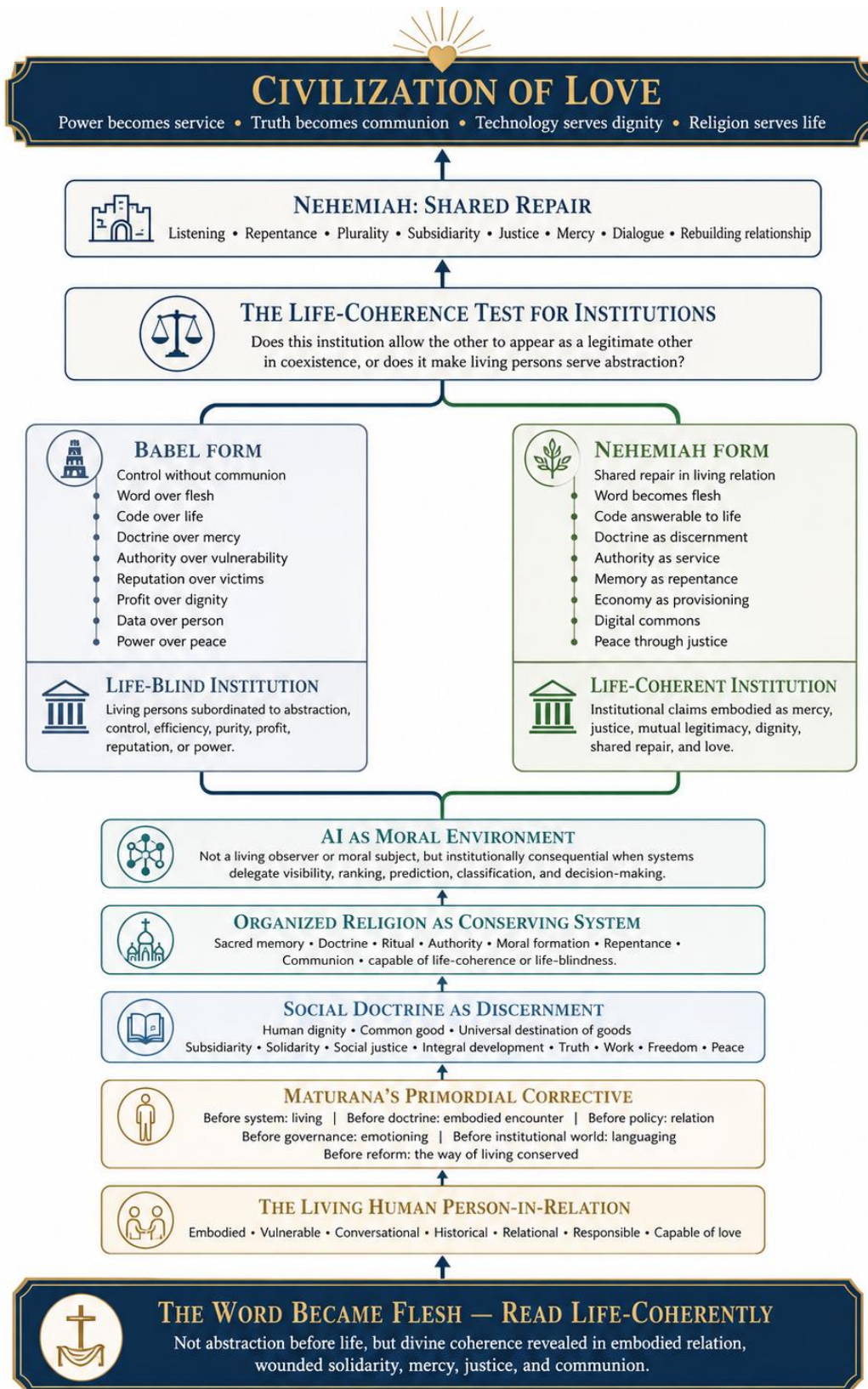


Figure 1. When the Word Becomes Flesh: The Primordial Test of Life-Coherence.

4. The Primordial Corrective: Living Before System

Most ethical and regulatory approaches to AI begin with governance: transparency, accountability, fairness, privacy, safety, auditability, human oversight, risk classification, and legal responsibility. These are indispensable. *Magnifica Humanitas* itself calls for regulatory tools, public oversight, responsibility, and governance. Yet the encyclical also insists that the issue is “not limited to regulation,” because the deeper matter is who holds technological power and how such power is used.

Governance often arrives after the deeper choices have already been made: after the technology has been imagined, funded, designed, trained, optimized, scaled, marketed, and normalized.

A platform may be transparent and still manipulative. An algorithm may be accurate and still dehumanizing. A system may be compliant and still extractive. A religious institution may be orthodox and still unjust. A law may be valid and still wound life.

The primordial question concerns the way of living that precedes and sustains the system. Maturana helps clarify this. Human beings do not live as detached rational observers who later apply language to a pre-given world. They live in embodied relation. They bring forth meaningful worlds through languaging, emotioning, and recurrent coordination (Maturana & Varela, 1980, 1992; Maturana, 1988).

Emotions are not secondary decorations added to thought; they configure the field of possible action. Fear opens one world. Love opens another. Control opens one world. Trust opens another.

For Maturana, love is not sentimentality. It is the domain in which the other appears as a legitimate other in coexistence (Maturana Romesín & Verden-Zöllner, 2008). This gives us the deepest institutional test:

Does this institution expand or restrict the domain in which the other appears as a legitimate other?

This question applies equally to AI and organized religion.

AI fails when the other appears only as data, user, consumer, risk, labor input, attention source, or target. Religion fails when the other appears only as sinner, outsider, heretic, threat, scandal, subordinate, convert, or object of charity.

Both become life-coherent only when the other appears as a living person whose dignity cannot be earned, optimized, erased, or instrumentalized.

5. When Word Detaches from Flesh: The Religious Inversion

The phrase “the Word became flesh” is central to Christian faith. Yet it can be misread. If “Word” is interpreted as disembodied abstraction, command, doctrine, law, or institutional speech standing above life, then the phrase becomes inverted. Word comes to dominate flesh. Doctrine comes to dominate mercy. Institution comes to dominate the vulnerable. Authority comes to dominate truth. Purity comes to dominate love.

This is the religious form of Babel.

Organized religion has a profound vocation. It conserves sacred memory, communal ritual, moral formation, intergenerational meaning, reverence, repentance, hope, and the possibility of communion. At its best, it is a vessel through which societies remember what power forgets: the dignity of the poor, the inviolability of life, the limits of domination, the need for mercy, and the hope of reconciliation.

But organized religion is also dangerous because it is a powerful conserving system. It can conserve fear as easily as trust. It can conserve hierarchy as easily as service. It can conserve silence as easily as truth. It can conserve institutional self-protection as easily as repentance. It can conserve exclusion as easily as communion.

The life-coherent critique is therefore not anti-religious. It is a call for religion to become more deeply faithful to life.

Religion becomes life-blind when it makes flesh serve word. Religion becomes life-coherent when word becomes flesh.

This means that doctrine must become discernment, not domination. Authority must become service, not control. Ritual must become formation in love, not symbolic evasion. Memory must become repentance, not nostalgia. Worship must become justice, not escape. Truth must become communion, not possession.

Magnifica Humanitas supports this reinterpretation when it describes Social Doctrine not as a handbook of principles to be applied, but as a process of shared discernment born from the encounter between the Gospel and history. It then calls Social Doctrine a “theology of communion in history,” where the Word made flesh remains present through dialogue, memory, and prophecy (Leo XIV, 2026).

This is crucial. Doctrine is life-coherent when it helps living communities discern what serves dignity, justice, truth, and communion in history. It becomes life-blind when it is wielded as power above history.

6. When Code Detaches from Life: The Technological Inversion

AI repeats the same danger in another register. Where religion can detach word from flesh, technology can detach code from life.

AI is not a living observer. It is not autopoietic (Maturana & Varela, 1980). It does not possess embodied vulnerability, conscience, repentance, love, or responsibility. It does not know from within what it means to suffer, forgive, care, labor, hope, or die. For this reason, AI should not be treated as a moral subject in the same sense as a living person.

This distinction also resonates with recent Catholic reflection on the relationship between artificial intelligence and human intelligence, especially the insistence that AI must not be confused with human intelligence in its embodied, relational, and moral dimensions (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith & Dicastery for Culture and Education, 2025).

Yet this does not make AI harmless. AI is not a moral subject, but it can become a moral environment. When institutions delegate classification, ranking, visibility, recommendation, prediction, risk assessment, employment screening, policing, educational evaluation, clinical triage, public communication, or military targeting to AI systems, those systems become institutionally consequential. They shape the conditions under which persons are seen, heard, judged, included, excluded, protected, or harmed.

This concern is consistent with international AI ethics guidance emphasizing human rights, human dignity, transparency, accountability, human oversight, and the protection of persons affected by AI systems (UNESCO, 2022; World Health Organization, 2021).

The danger, then, is not that AI is secretly alive. The danger is that human institutions may organize life around non-living systems as if they were authoritative. In such cases, code detaches from life and begins to govern flesh.

When code detaches from life, persons become data profiles. Workers become costs. Patients become risk scores. Children become attention markets. Citizens become behavioral targets. The poor become invisible. The vulnerable become training material. The human mystery becomes performance.

Magnifica Humanitas sees this danger clearly. It warns that if technology becomes the ultimate criterion, the human person risks being reduced to data, a cog in a machine, or a commodity. It also warns that the digital attention economy can exploit vulnerability and weaken interior freedom, and that algorithmic systems can create forms of social control through profiling, prediction, and the architecture of visibility (Leo XIV, 2026).

The technological inversion is therefore structurally similar to the religious inversion. In both cases, abstraction forgets flesh. In both cases, a system that should serve life begins to command life. In both cases, persons are asked to conform to a disembodied order that cannot feel their wounds.

A life-coherent AI ethic must therefore begin with the embodied person-in-relation, not with computational capacity. The question is not only whether AI is powerful, accurate, or innovative. The question is whether it remains answerable to living dignity.

7. Slavery, Digital Colonialism, and Institutional Repentance

The analogy between historical slavery and digital colonialism must be handled with care. It must not flatten the historical specificity, bodily horror, racialized violence, and intergenerational trauma of chattel slavery. The analogy proposed here is more limited and more precise: it concerns institutional delay, moral blindness, extraction, legitimized domination, and the danger of recognizing injustice only after it has already been normalized.

Within this careful frame, the slavery passage in *Magnifica Humanitas* becomes an ethical hinge. The document acknowledges a wound in Christian memory and asks pardon in the name of the Church (Leo XIV, 2026). It then connects that memory to contemporary forms of domination, including data appropriation, digital extraction, and new forms of slavery.

This is not a side issue. It is one of the moral centers of the document.

The apology reveals that organized religion can fail its own truth. It can possess doctrines of dignity while tolerating practices of domination. It can preach salvation while delaying justice. It can defend order while flesh is being wounded. It can mistake institutional continuity for faithfulness.

This is why repentance is not weakness. It is institutional metanoia. It is the sign that an institution remains capable of being corrected by life.

Without repentance, doctrine becomes armor. With repentance, doctrine becomes flesh.

Without memory, authority protects itself. With memory, authority becomes service.

Without repair, ritual risks evasion. With repair, ritual becomes re-entry into communion.

The document then makes a decisive contemporary turn. The memory of past complicity becomes a call to vigilance in the present. The encyclical warns that colonialism now assumes new forms: it appropriates data and transforms personal lives into exploitable information.

Health data, epidemiological profiles, genetic maps, and demographic information become the new “rare earths” of power. Shared knowledge must become a true common good, not an instrument of dominance. Otherwise, it warns, the digital age will not be post-colonial, but colonial in another form (Leo XIV, 2026).

This passage is extraordinary for the life-coherence project. It connects historical slavery, institutional repentance, data colonialism, digital extraction, and AI governance into one moral arc. The Church’s past delay becomes a warning about future apology. The question is no longer merely, “Did we condemn past slavery?” It becomes:

Are we recognizing the new forms of slavery now, before another apology becomes necessary?

The encyclical names hidden exploitation in technological supply chains, forced labor, platform-enabled recruitment and control, and data-driven business models that may deepen vulnerability. It calls for transparent supply chains, due diligence, protection of workers, and transformation of the digital environment from exploitation into protection and dignity (Leo XIV, 2026).

This is the point where life-coherence becomes concrete. An institution is not life-coherent because it professes dignity. It is life-coherent when it prevents bodies from being exploited, voices from being silenced, labor from being hidden, data from being stolen, vulnerability from being monetized, and memory from being sanitized.

8. Social Doctrine as Discernment of Coexistence

Magnifica Humanitas retrieves the great principles of Catholic Social Doctrine — human dignity, the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity, social justice, and integral human development — within the longer magisterial lineage of modern Catholic social teaching (Leo XIII, 1891; Second Vatican Council, 1965; Paul VI, 1967; John Paul II, 1981, 1987, 1991; Benedict XVI, 2009; Francis, 2015, 2020, 2024; Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2024; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004).

These are not merely Catholic terms. Read life-coherently, they are criteria for judging whether institutions conserve life-serving coexistence.

Human dignity means the person is never reducible to function, productivity, compliance, identity, usefulness, purity, data, or performance.

The common good means that social arrangements must enable persons and communities to flourish, not merely aggregate private advantage.

The universal destination of goods means that the goods of creation, culture, knowledge, technology, and data cannot rightly be enclosed for the benefit of a few.

Subsidiarity means that agency should remain close to life; higher powers should support, not absorb, the creativity and responsibility of persons, families, communities, and local institutions.

Solidarity means that interdependence must become responsibility, not indifference.

Social justice means that institutions must repair structural patterns that diminish life.

Integral human development means that progress must serve the whole person and all persons, including future generations and the common home.

The encyclical explicitly applies these principles to digital infrastructures and algorithms (Leo XIV, 2026). It says that control over platforms, infrastructure, data, and computing power often belongs not to states but to major economic and technological actors, who set conditions for access, visibility, and participation. It then says the criteria for discernment must be human dignity, the common good, universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, solidarity, and social justice.

This gives the white paper its evaluative framework:

An institution is life-coherent when it conserves the conditions under which persons, communities, and the Earth community can become more fully alive.

This applies to religion and AI alike.

A religious institution must ask: does our doctrine become mercy, our worship become justice, our memory become repentance, our authority become service, our truth become communion?

A technological institution must ask: does our code become care, our data become shared good, our design become responsibility, our infrastructure become participation, our innovation become dignity?

9. The Digital Civil Commons

One of the most significant contributions of *Magnifica Humanitas* is its extension of the universal destination of goods into the digital sphere. The encyclical states that the goods universally intended for everyone must now include not only land, water, air, and natural resources, but also patents, algorithms, digital platforms, technological infrastructure, and data. When such goods remain concentrated in the hands of a few without adequate access and sharing, a new imbalance emerges that contradicts the universal destination of goods and widens the divide between those included in the digital revolution and those excluded from it (Leo XIV, 2026).

This is the theological opening for a digital civil commons.

If data, algorithms, platforms, computational resources, and AI infrastructures are treated only as private assets, then the digital age becomes an enclosure of the conditions of participation. Persons become raw material for systems they do not govern. Communities become passive recipients of standards set elsewhere. Workers become hidden supports of algorithmic production. Poorer regions become sources of extractable data. The vulnerable become training material.

This is Babel in digital form.

The Nehemiah alternative is not anti-technology. It is a reorientation of technology toward shared repair. It asks that AI be governed as a common-home reality: accessible, accountable, participatory, transparent, dignity-preserving, and answerable to the communities it affects.

To disarm AI does not mean to stop using it (Leo XIV, 2026). It means to free it from armed competition, monopolistic control, extractive surveillance, geopolitical domination, and the assumption that technical power confers the right to govern.

Thus the life-coherent technological question is:

Does AI become a digital commons of participation, or a digital enclosure of life?

10. The Civilization of Love as a Conserved Way of Living

The civilization of love must not be reduced to moral aspiration or religious poetry. It is a way of living that must be conserved through recurrent practices, institutions, designs, policies, rituals, habits, and relationships.

The civilization of love is not sentimental. It is operational.

It appears when words are disarmed. It appears when truth is shared rather than weaponized. It appears when authority protects the vulnerable. It appears when technology serves dignity. It appears when data becomes a common good. It appears when labor is visible and honored. It appears when institutions repent. It appears when the other is accepted as legitimate. It appears when wounded flesh becomes the site of revelation rather than disposal.

The culture of power, by contrast, is also a conserved way of living. It appears when institutions defend themselves before victims. It appears when technology treats persons as extractable data. It appears when religion protects reputation over truth. It appears when markets turn vulnerability into profit. It appears when politics treats enemies as non-persons. It appears when law preserves order without justice.

The master diagram's deepest insight is that Babel and Nehemiah are not two external options. They are two conserved ways of living that can appear inside every institution.

There can be Babel in religion. There can be Babel in AI. There can be Babel in medicine. There can be Babel in economics. There can be Babel in law. There can be Babel in education.

And there can be Nehemiah wherever people rebuild the broken walls of coexistence.

11. The Life-Coherence Test for Institutions

This paper proposes that an institution is life-coherent when its word, code, doctrine, law, ritual, policy, economy, or technology becomes flesh as embodied love, justice, mercy, mutual legitimacy, and shared repair. It becomes life-blind when living persons are made to serve abstraction, control, reputation, efficiency, profit, purity, or power.

This criterion allows the Babel–Nehemiah contrast to become operational.

Babel is not merely a biblical tower. It is any institution that conserves control without communion.

Nehemiah is not merely an ancient governor. It is any institutional pattern that conserves shared repair, distributed responsibility, listening, and the rebuilding of relationship.

The following matrix is offered as a heuristic, not as a comprehensive comparative institutional study. Its purpose is to show how the life-coherence test can be applied analogically across institutional domains. Each domain would require fuller historical and empirical treatment in a separate study. Here, the matrix serves only to clarify the pattern: Babel and Nehemiah are not merely biblical episodes but recurring institutional possibilities.

Institution	Babel Form	Nehemiah Form	Life-Coherent Question
Organized religion	Doctrine over flesh; authority over mercy; reputation over victims; purity over communion	Word becomes flesh as mercy, justice, repentance, service, and communion	<i>Does this tradition make the other more visible as a legitimate other, or does it sanctify exclusion?</i>
Artificial intelligence	Code over life; persons reduced to data, prediction, performance, attention, or risk	AI as accountable artifact serving dignity, truth, work, freedom, and shared repair	Does this system conserve control or deepen humane coexistence?
Economy	Accumulation without limits; labor as cost; nature as resource; vulnerability as market	Provisioning for life; dignified work; ecological limits; common good	Does economic activity expand or diminish life-capacity?

Institution	Babel Form	Nehemiah Form	Life-Coherent Question
Politics	Power without communion; friend-enemy logic; manipulation of fear; short-term domination	Shared responsibility; dialogue; protection of the vulnerable; peace through justice	Does politics organize common life or weaponize division?
Law	Order without justice; procedure without repair; legality without life	Justice as restoration; rights as protection of dignity; accountability for harm	Does law protect living persons or merely stabilize power?
Education	Credentialing, competition, conformity, and employability alone	Formation in discernment, responsibility, wisdom, and participation	Does education produce compliant functionaries or whole persons?
Medicine and health systems	Bodies as cases, data, revenue, throughput, or risk	Healing as relational care; dignity of patient and caregiver; prevention and justice	Does medicine serve living persons or administrative abstraction?
Science	Knowledge as control, extraction, prestige, or domination	Knowledge as humble participation in reality and service to life	Does science deepen responsibility or merely increase power?
Media and communication	Attention capture, outrage, spectacle, propaganda, algorithmic polarization	Truth as common good; dialogue; attention as sacred civic capacity	Does communication enlarge shared reality or fragment it?

The table makes visible the central insight: every institution can build Babel, and every institution can also undergo Nehemiah-like repair.

12. The Word Becomes Flesh or Babel Returns

The conclusion of this white paper turns on the phrase: **the Word became flesh.**

Read life-blindly, this phrase can be distorted into hierarchy: word over flesh, doctrine over body, spirit over matter, authority over vulnerability, institution over person. But read life-coherently, it says the opposite. It says truth becomes trustworthy by entering embodied life. It says God is not revealed as abstraction above wounds but as love within wounded history. It says meaning is not fulfilled by escaping flesh but by becoming communion in flesh.

The life-coherent reading proposed here does not deny the ontological priority of the Logos in Christian confession. Rather, it clarifies the order of human knowing and institutional responsibility. The Logos may be ontologically primordial in Christian faith, but the Logos is epistemically accessible to human beings only through embodied life, historical relation, vulnerability, and love. For human beings, meaning is not encountered outside flesh; it is received, tested, and made trustworthy within flesh.

Thus, “the Word became flesh” should not be read as abstraction before life, doctrine over embodiment, or authority above vulnerability. It means that divine truth becomes visible as embodied love, wounded solidarity, mercy, justice, and communion. The Word does not cancel flesh; the Word is revealed through flesh.

This becomes the primordial test of institutions:

Does the institution help word become flesh? Or does it make flesh submit to disembodied word?

Does religion become mercy, justice, and communion? Or does it become doctrine without love?

Does AI become care, participation, and dignity? Or does it become code without conscience?

Does law become justice? Or does it become order without life?

Does economy become provisioning? Or does it become accumulation without limits?

Does politics become shared responsibility? Or does it become power without communion?

Where word becomes flesh, Nehemiah is possible. Where flesh is subordinated to word, Babel returns.

13. Seven Theses

The paper’s argument can be summarized in seven theses.

Thesis 1: The AI crisis is an institutional crisis.

AI reveals a broader pattern in which human institutions detach word, code, law, doctrine, profit, or power from embodied life.

Thesis 2: Babel and Nehemiah are civilizational diagnostics.

Babel is any system that conserves control without communion. Nehemiah is any system that conserves shared repair in living relation.

Thesis 3: The Catholic case is paradigmatic, not exhaustive.

Magnifica Humanitas provides a powerful case through which to examine organized religion's capacity for both life-blindness and life-coherent repentance.

Thesis 4: AI is not a moral subject, but it can become a moral environment.

AI is not living, autopoietic, loving, or responsible; yet it becomes morally consequential when institutions delegate visibility, classification, prediction, and decision-making to it.

Thesis 5: The universal destination of goods must now include digital goods.

Data, algorithms, platforms, computational resources, and technological infrastructures must be judged through the common good, not only through private property or market value.

Thesis 6: Institutional repentance is a form of life-coherent intelligence.

The encyclical's apology regarding slavery shows that institutions remain alive when they can remember harm, confess complicity, and repair their way of living.

Thesis 7: The Word becomes flesh or Babel returns.

Every institution must be judged by whether its claims become embodied love, dignity, justice, mercy, and shared repair — or whether living persons are subordinated to abstraction, system, and control.

14. Conclusion: The Primordial Test of Life-Coherence

The age of AI reveals a truth that applies to all institutions: no system is life-coherent simply because it claims truth, efficiency, authority, intelligence, legality, tradition, orthodoxy, or progress. Every institution must be judged by the way of living it conserves.

Magnifica Humanitas gives this test theological and social urgency. Technology is never neutral. Babel is always possible. The person can be reduced to data and performance. Digital colonialism can repeat older patterns of domination. Organized religion itself must remember its

failures, repent of its complicities, and refuse to delay justice again. Social Doctrine becomes credible only when it becomes a theology of communion in history.

Maturana gives this test its primordial biological-relational depth (Maturana & Varela, 1980, 1992; Maturana, 1988; Maturana Romesín & Verden-Zöllner, 2008). Human beings bring forth worlds through living, emotioning, languaging, and recurrent coordination. Love is the domain in which the other appears as a legitimate other in coexistence. Institutions conserve either this domain of mutual legitimacy or its negation.

The final criterion is therefore simple but demanding:

An institution is life-coherent when its word, code, doctrine, law, ritual, policy, economy, or system becomes flesh as embodied love, justice, mercy, mutual legitimacy, and shared repair. It becomes life-blind when living persons are made to serve abstraction, control, reputation, efficiency, profit, purity, or power.

This is the wisdom appearing from the master diagram.

Religion is true to life when the Word becomes flesh. Technology is true to life when code remains answerable to flesh. Civilization is true to life when power becomes service. Humanity remains human when its institutions conserve love rather than Babel.

Appendix A — Master Diagram Caption

Figure 1. When the Word Becomes Flesh: The Primordial Test of Life-Coherence.

This master diagram interprets Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas* through a Maturana-informed, life-coherent lens. The encyclical frames the age of artificial intelligence as a choice between Babel and Nehemiah: between technological and institutional power that reduces persons to data, performance, or instruments, and shared rebuilding ordered toward dignity, justice, truth, freedom, work, peace, and the civilization of love. The diagram deepens this contrast by adding a primordial corrective: before technology, doctrine, governance, or institutional reform, there is embodied living, emotioning, languaging, and the conserved way of life. Institutions become life-blind when word, code, doctrine, law, ritual, economy, or power is detached from flesh. They become life-coherent when their claims become embodied as mercy, justice, mutual legitimacy, repentance, shared repair, and communion.

Appendix B — Seven Theses: Quick Reference

1. The AI crisis is an institutional crisis.

AI reveals a broader pattern in which human institutions detach word, code, law, doctrine, profit, or power from embodied life.

2. **Babel and Nehemiah are civilizational diagnostics.**
Babel is any system that conserves control without communion. Nehemiah is any system that conserves shared repair in living relation.
 3. **The Catholic case is paradigmatic, not exhaustive.**
Magnifica Humanitas provides a powerful case through which to examine organized religion’s capacity for both life-blindness and life-coherent repentance.
 4. **AI is not a moral subject, but it can become a moral environment.**
AI is not living, autopoietic, loving, or responsible; yet it becomes morally consequential when institutions delegate visibility, classification, prediction, and decision-making to it.
 5. **The universal destination of goods must now include digital goods.**
Data, algorithms, platforms, computational resources, and technological infrastructures must be judged through the common good, not only through private property or market value.
 6. **Institutional repentance is a form of life-coherent intelligence.**
The encyclical’s apology regarding slavery shows that institutions remain alive when they can remember harm, confess complicity, and repair their way of living.
 7. **The Word becomes flesh or Babel returns.**
Every institution must be judged by whether its claims become embodied love, dignity, justice, mercy, and shared repair — or whether living persons are subordinated to abstraction, system, and control.
-

Appendix C — Operational Diagnostic: The Life-Coherence Test

The following diagnostic questions translate the paper’s argument into practical institutional discernment.

1. The Primordial Question

What way of living does this institution conserve?

Does the institution conserve fear, rivalry, extraction, silence, dependency, and domination? Or does it conserve trust, truthfulness, participation, mercy, responsibility, and shared repair?

2. The Maturanan Question

Does this institution allow the other to appear as a legitimate other in coexistence?

Are persons encountered as living beings, or as categories to be managed? Are the poor, wounded, women, children, migrants, outsiders, dissenters, victims, workers, users, data subjects, and future generations treated as legitimate participants in a shared world?

3. The Incarnational Question

Does word become flesh here?

Does doctrine become mercy? Does authority become service? Does ritual become repair? Does ethics become protection? Does law become justice? Does code become care? Does policy become lived dignity?

4. The Babel Question

Where are living persons being made to serve abstraction?

Are persons being subordinated to reputation, profit, purity, ideology, efficiency, scale, data capture, procedure, market growth, or institutional continuity?

5. The Nehemiah Question

Where is shared repair already possible?

Can the institution listen, inspect honestly, distribute responsibility, rebuild trust, protect the vulnerable, and restore relationship?

6. The Commons Question

Are the goods needed for participation being enclosed or shared?

In the digital age, this includes data, algorithms, platforms, computation, digital literacy, health information, communication infrastructures, and technological capacity.

7. The Repentance Question

Can this institution remember harm, confess complicity, and change its way of living?

Can memory become truth, truth become responsibility, and responsibility become repair?

Appendix D — Glossary of Key Terms

Artificial Intelligence as Moral Environment

AI is not a living observer or moral subject, but it becomes morally consequential when institutions delegate classification, visibility, prediction, recommendation, decision-making, or authority to it.

Babel

A civilizational and institutional pattern in which technical, religious, political, economic, or bureaucratic power conserves control without communion.

Civilization of Love

A conserved way of living in which power becomes service, truth becomes communion, technology serves dignity, and institutions remain answerable to life.

Digital Civil Commons

The life-serving governance of digital goods — including data, algorithms, platforms, infrastructures, computation, and digital literacy — as conditions of shared participation rather than instruments of private enclosure or domination.

Emotioning

In Maturana's vocabulary, the dynamic emotional domain that configures what actions are possible in a given relation or situation.

Institutional Repentance

The capacity of an institution to remember harm, confess complicity, repair damage, and change its way of living.

Languaging

Maturana's term for the recurrent coordination of actions through which human beings bring forth shared worlds of meaning, responsibility, memory, and relation.

Life-Coherence

The alignment of persons, institutions, technologies, and systems with the preservation, restoration, and expansion of life-capacity across embodied, relational, social, ecological, and spiritual dimensions.

Nehemiah

A pattern of shared repair in living relation: listening, distributed responsibility, rebuilding trust, restoring relationship, and making institutions answerable to the vulnerable.

The Other as Legitimate Other

Maturana's operational understanding of love: the relational domain in which another being is accepted as legitimate in coexistence.

The Word Became Flesh

Read life-coherently, this means not abstraction before life, but divine coherence revealed in embodied relation, vulnerability, mercy, justice, and communion.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the long traditions of Catholic Social Doctrine, Maturana's biology of cognition and biology of love, and contemporary ethical reflection on artificial intelligence that inform this work. Special acknowledgement is given to Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas*, whose Babel–Nehemiah architecture, treatment of technological power, and call for renewed social discernment provide the immediate occasion for this white paper.

The author also acknowledges the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT in iterative conceptual development, drafting support, structural refinement, and editorial synthesis. All final judgments, interpretations, and responsibility for the argument remain with the author.

Author Bio

Dr. Bichara Sahely is a physician, writer, and systems thinker from St. Kitts and Nevis. Trained in biology and internal medicine, his work explores the conditions under which persons, institutions, communities, and civilizations preserve or diminish life-capacity. His writing brings together Catholic Social Doctrine, Maturana's biology of love, civil commons theory, life-value ethics, peace studies, artificial intelligence ethics, and a broader life-coherence framework for health, governance, ecology, and civilization.

Back Cover Synopsis

In *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, Dr. Bichara Sahely offers a Maturana-informed, life-coherent reading of Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas*. The white paper argues that the age of artificial intelligence reveals a deeper institutional crisis: word, doctrine, code, law, ritual, economy, and power can become detached from embodied life.

Using the encyclical's contrast between Babel and Nehemiah, the paper proposes a primordial test for every institution: **What way of living does it conserve?** Babel names any system that conserves control without communion. Nehemiah names shared repair in living relation. Organized religion becomes life-coherent when word becomes flesh as mercy, justice, repentance, and communion. Technology becomes life-coherent when code remains answerable to living persons, dignified work, truth, freedom, and the common good.

The paper concludes that civilization remains human only when its institutions conserve love rather than Babel.

References

- Benedict XVI. (2009). *Caritas in veritate: On integral human development in charity and truth*. The Holy See.
- Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. (2024). *Dignitas infinita: Declaration on human dignity*. The Holy See.
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240402_dignitas-infinita_en.html
- Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, & Dicastery for Culture and Education. (2025). *Antiqua et nova: Note on the relationship between artificial intelligence and human intelligence*. The Holy See.
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20250128_antiqua-et-nova_en.html
- Francis. (2015). *Laudato si': On care for our common home*. The Holy See.
- Francis. (2020). *Fratelli tutti: On fraternity and social friendship*. The Holy See.
- Francis. (2024). *Dilexit nos: On the human and divine love of the Heart of Jesus Christ*. The Holy See.
- John Paul II. (1981). *Laborem exercens: On human work*. The Holy See.
- John Paul II. (1987). *Sollicitudo rei socialis: On social concern*. The Holy See.
- John Paul II. (1991). *Centesimus annus: On the hundredth anniversary of Rerum novarum*. The Holy See.
- Leo XIII. (1891). *Rerum novarum: On capital and labor*. The Holy See.
https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html
- Leo XIV. (2026). *Magnifica humanitas: On safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence*. The Holy See. <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/encyclicals/documents/20260515-magnifica-humanitas.html>
- Maturana, H. R. (1988). Reality: The search for objectivity or the quest for a compelling argument. *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, 9(1), 25–82.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03033910.1988.10557705>
- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1980). *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living*. D. Reidel.

- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1992). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding* (Rev. ed.). Shambhala.
- Maturana Romesín, H., & Verden-Zöllner, G. (2008). *The origin of humanness in the biology of love*. Imprint Academic.
- Paul VI. (1967). *Populorum progressio: On the development of peoples*. The Holy See.
- Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. (2004). *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html
- Second Vatican Council. (1965). *Gaudium et spes: Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world*. The Holy See.
https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html
- UNESCO. (2022). *Recommendation on the ethics of artificial intelligence*. UNESCO.
<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/recommendation-ethics-artificial-intelligence>
- World Health Organization. (2021). *Ethics and governance of artificial intelligence for health: WHO guidance*. World Health Organization.
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240029200>