



ADDRESS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

*Article 17 TFEU Seminar – Health and Well-being in the Age of Artificial Intelligence
Panel 1: Digital Fairness by Design – Regulating Digital Environments for Well-being*

Rev. Professor Emmanuel Agius
European Parliament, Brussels – 9 June 2026

Vice-President Sberna, distinguished Members of the European Parliament, colleagues,

It is a privilege to address this seminar under Article 17 TFEU, a provision that rightly recognises that the moral and spiritual traditions of civil society have an indispensable contribution to make to the governance of our common life.

Our discussion has acquired a significant new point of reference. On 15 May 2026, on the hundred and thirty-fifth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIV promulgated *Magnifica Humanitas* which is the most comprehensive magisterial reflection to date on artificial intelligence and human dignity. I shall draw upon it throughout.

I. Pivotal Choice

Pope Leo XIV opens *Magnifica Humanitas* with a clear diagnosis: humanity stands before "a pivotal choice: either to construct a new Tower of Babel or to build the city in which God and humanity dwell together."

The defining paradox of our digital age is this: the very technologies designed to connect human beings are increasingly contributing to isolation, manipulation, and the erosion of authentic freedom. Across Europe, we witness rising depression, chronic loneliness, compulsive digital dependency, and the weakening of genuine interpersonal relationships. As COMECE's recent reflection paper on mental health in Europe makes clear, loneliness must now be treated as a genuine public health priority.

The Pope is direct: AI systems are never morally neutral. They can consolidate power, amplify exclusion, and exploit psychological vulnerability.

The question before this panel is therefore not whether digital environments require regulation. They do. The deeper question is whether that regulation is guided by an adequate understanding of the human person and ordered toward an authentic conception of the common good.

II. The Insufficiency of a Purely Technical Framework

The Digital Services Act and the AI Act represent important advances. Yet *Magnifica Humanitas* explains why they remain insufficient on their own. The encyclical identifies what it calls the “technocratic paradigm,” the tendency to allow efficiency, control, and profit to determine personal and social life.

Regulation framed primarily in technical or economic terms, such as market fairness, data governance, and algorithmic transparency, will remain inadequate unless it addresses a more fundamental question: what kind of persons are these environments shaping? The Catholic tradition insists that the human person cannot be reduced to a data subject, a consumer or merely a node within a network.

Every person is relational by nature, constituted through bonds of love, solidarity, and meaning that exceed digital interaction. As Pope Leo XIV writes, “So called artificial intelligences do not undergo experiences, do not possess a body, do not feel joy or pain, do not mature through relationships and do not know from within what love, work, friendship or responsibility mean.” This is not an expression of technological pessimism. It is an anthropological reality that must guide regulatory design.

Mental well-being is inseparable from authentic human encounter: from presence, empathy, and accompaniment. When digital environments are designed to replace rather than sustain these bonds, they do not simply diminish convenience or efficiency. They produce what the encyclical describes as genuine “anthropological harm”.

III. Design as a Moral Act: Five Levels of Governance

Pope Leo XIV states clearly: “Every design choice reflects a vision of humanity.” This leads to what experts today describe as governance by design, namely, building ethical, legal, technical, and societal considerations into AI systems from the earliest stages of development, not as afterthoughts. Effective governance operates simultaneously at five distinct levels:

1. Laws and Regulation

The EU AI Act establishes a risk-based framework for AI systems, the Digital Services Act regulates harmful content and algorithmic amplification, and privacy law protects personal data. These instruments are necessary but not sufficient. The AI Act, for instance, categorises risks but does not yet adequately address the anthropological harm caused by systems designed to exploit loneliness or dependency.

2. Organisational Governance

Companies must implement internal policies, ethical audits, and clear accountability structures. When algorithms decide who receives credit, healthcare referrals, or employment opportunities, someone must be identifiable as responsible. *Magnifica Humanitas* insists: “accountability is crucial — the possibility of identifying who must account for decisions, justify them, and remedy any harm caused.”

3. Technical Safeguards

Systems must be tested before deployment, monitored continuously, and secured against misuse. The encyclical's call for "independent checks and transparency regarding algorithms" translates directly into requirements for explainability, bias auditing, and incident reporting — obligations that must be legally enforceable, not merely aspirational.

4. Responsible Design

This is the level that Pope Leo XIV addresses most directly. Human centred design asks, before deployment, whether a system strengthens or weakens authentic human relationships. The encyclical warns that "the danger is not so much that a person may believe they are communicating with another person, but that they may gradually lose the very desire to form genuine human connections." Design that exploits human vulnerability in order to maximise engagement is not simply a commercial decision; it is a moral act with profound social consequences.

5. Public Participation

Here *Magnifica Humanitas* makes its most distinctive contribution. Applying the principle of subsidiarity, the Pope insists that digital governance must not "be imposed from above in an opaque and unilateral manner." Families, schools, parishes, trade unions, and civil society organisations are not merely stakeholders to be consulted; they are primary agents of the common good.

This means workers whose jobs are transformed by automation deserve a voice in how that transformation is managed. Citizens subjected to algorithmic profiling deserve meaningful recourse. Communities shaped by platform architectures must be able to participate in decisions about those architectures. The most mature governance frameworks, including under the AI Act's provisions for fundamental rights impact assessments, will only fulfil their purpose if this participatory logic is taken seriously.

IV. Three Concrete Orientations

First, the EU should require ethical transparency: not only what algorithms do, but the understanding of the human person they presuppose. This requires independent ethical audits with meaningful civil society participation.

Second, age-appropriate design for children and adolescents must become a binding legal obligation, with responsibility placed upon service providers rather than families. The evidence of harm is no longer deniable.

Third, regulation alone will not suffice. Pope Leo XIV reminds us that the "civilization of love" will not arise from a single spectacular gesture, but from the accumulation of small and steadfast acts of fidelity. Families, parishes, and civil society must therefore be recognised as primary agents of human flourishing. They are not alternatives to regulation but essential partners in fostering the social and moral conditions necessary for genuine human well-being.

Conclusion

Magnifica Humanitas renews the question first posed by Pope John Paul II: does this technology "make human life on earth more human in every aspect of that life? Does it make it more worthy of man?"

If the answer is affirmative, such technology deserves to be welcomed and governed responsibly. If, however, "power grows while the heart withers and human bonds fray, then we are faced with a new form of Babel."

We are builders of a city. Indeed, we are builders of the European Union itself. The kind of city we create is determined not only in legislative chambers, but also through every design decision, regulatory standard, and cultural assumption that we choose either to question or to leave unchallenged. The future of our common life depends as much on these daily choices as it does on the laws we enact.

Thank you.