YTU SRC Newsletter

Fig. 1. Image generated by ChatGPT, July 10, 2026, from the prompt "a robot hand and a human hand reaching toward each other."

‘Civilisation of love’: webinar affirms human limits and dignity in the age of AI

Published
01 July 2026 , Written By Melbourne Catholic

Following the publication of Pope Leo’s first encyclical Magnifica humanitas in May, a recent webinar grappled with some of the implications of artificial intelligence (AI), exploring what it means to be authentically human in the age of AI.

The webinar was co-hosted on 4 June by ACU’s Plunkett Centre for Ethics and the University of Notre Dame’s Centre for Technology and Human Futures (CTHF).

Moderated by CTHF director Dr Victoria Lorrimar, the panel included Plunkett Centre director Dr Xavier Symons, secretary of the Vatican’s Dicastery for Culture and Education Bishop Paul Tighe and Dr Lorenn Ruster, a senior research fellow at the Australian National University’s School of Cybernetics.

In a wide-ranging conversation, the panel touched on themes including responsibility, peace and conflict, public accountability and the positive possibilities of AI, returning frequently to the idea that Catholic engagement with AI should begin not with considerations of technological capability but by recognising the dignity of the human person and the positive role of human limitations in human flourishing.

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Dr Symons began by giving an overview of Magnifica humanitas, including its concern with the dehumanising potential of AI and the ways technology developers can misuse the enormous power they wield. Reflecting on some of the things that stood out for him in the encyclical, he pointed to the Pope’s use of the language of limits.

The encyclical, he said, asserts ‘that we should not look to technology as a means of salvation from the weaknesses of humanity’. In the Christian understanding, limits ‘are not evil but rather are a means by which we flourish,’ Dr Symons said. ‘We cultivate virtues and we’re brought together into relationships precisely because we are weak and dependent on each other to different extents and in different ways throughout the course of our lives.’

It is, he said, ‘this notion of preserving these fundamental aspects of human life and human relationships—the voices and faces that make up authentic human interactions—that … gets at what it means to preserve the grandeur of humanity in an age of AI.’

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Bishop Tighe has played a key role in the Church's engagement on AI over a number of years, including through the Rome Call for AI Ethics, the Vatican document Antiqua et nova and the Minerva Dialogues, a series of conversations in Rome between leaders in technology and representatives of the Church.

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Magnifica humanitas—the latest and arguably most significant development in this ongoing engagement—is 'about safeguarding humanity, precisely at a time of AI,' Bishop Tighe said.

'Everybody is saying we want it person-centered, we want it human-centered, we want it at the service of humanity, we want it for good, but we have to give meaning and purpose to those ideas.' Central to this task, and to the encyclical, is the question, 'What do we mean by human flourishing?'

The answer to that question has many elements, the bishop said, including human practices and behaviours that contribute to individual flourishing, the role of communities and relationships, and the importance of inclusion, peace and living in harmony with nature.

The encyclical addresses the extraordinary power of AI, and the ways it can amplify both the human capacity for good and our capacity 'to get things wrong'. AI has the potential, he said, to exacerbate a number of existing 'fault lines' in human society, including competition, polarisation and inequality.

So if we look at the fault lines, I think we have to realise it's going to take an intentionality on the part of the human community to steer AI into service of what is good, of what is best, recognising that if we don't do that, our existing inequalities, the existing structures of sin, are likely to determine its playing out in ways that are not beneficial.'

Paraphrasing Alfred Einstein, Bishop Tighe observed that we have 'a perfection of means, all sorts of technologies that can do great things, but … we have a confusion of ends: we're not too sure what we want to do with them.'

We come with the capacity to be transformed by love and to allow love to shape how we engage with and direct a better future.

When Pope Leo speaks of 'disarming' AI, Bishop Tighe said, he means both a literal disarming (for instance, of lethal autonomous weapon systems) and a metaphorical disarming: of the competitive AI race that works against the wise and careful development of technology, of the inequality that excludes peoples and cultures from its benefits, and of the polarising words and habits that flourish when trust is eroded and we no longer know our neighbours.

Picking up again on the theme of limits, he said that this is not about achieving perfection. 'We come as humans with limits, with weaknesses, with structures that are bad, but we come with the capacity to be transformed by love and to allow love to shape how we engage with and direct a better future.'

Dr Lorenn Ruster, whose work at ACU focuses on how to develop AI that is grounded in an appreciation of human dignity, observed that many discussions about responsible or ethical AI focus on algorithms and the ways AI is trained (what she referred to as 'parameters' and 'processes'), rather than on deeper questions of 'purpose' or 'pathways' (the broader structures that govern AI systems).

This idea that limitations are bad and to be eliminated is really challenged in this encyclical, and the growth that comes from suffering and limitations is highlighted.

In Magnifica humanitas, she said, Pope Leo looks at 'all four of those Ps'. For instance, when he discusses the kind of 'technocratic paradigm' that seeks 'to decrease weakness and uncertainty, eliminate limitations and achieve total control', he 'really highlights that this is antithetical to a Catholic view of what the human vision is, which is grounded in dignity. So this idea that limitations are bad and to be eliminated is really challenged in this encyclical, and the growth that comes from suffering and limitations is highlighted.'

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Dr Ruster said that while many other documents are 'very focused on what I would call a protective form of responsibility—trying to make sure that we don't do harm'—Pope Leo places 'a more proactive, prospective form of responsibility' at the heart of his encyclical. 'It's actually calling us to a much bigger conversation around … a civilisation of love.'

Developers, she said, often think of themselves as building 'neutral platforms', so 'they're not necessarily taking responsibility [for the fact] that what they're doing is shaping how we see ourselves as human'. In his encyclical, however, Pope Leo 'is very clear that no one is without responsibility.'

We don't have to race at the speed of the machine. We have to think about how this extraordinary technology can actually enrich our lives.

Bishop Tighe agreed. 'What we can't do is sit back and hope for the best.' Instead, 'we have to somehow—as humans, across a range of our skills and abilities and our qualifications—come together to ensure that there is adequate oversight'.

We should remember, he said, that 'this technology, which frightens us in some ways, which challenges us in other ways, is itself an extraordinary achievement.' Our response should not be to dismiss AI as intrinsically evil or to feel overwhelmed by the rapid changes and raging debates happening around us. 'We don't have to race at the speed of the machine,' he said. 'We have to think about how this extraordinary technology can actually enrich our lives and therefore exclude … the things that would be damaging.'

In reflecting on how we might go about this, Bishop Tighe observed that the word dignity appears frequently in Magnifica humanitas.
Our dignity, our worth, is intrinsic. God loves us as we are, loves us unconditionally.

Pope Leo reminds us, he said, that dignity 'doesn't have to be earned, doesn't have to be achieved. It's not something the government gives you; it's something that every person has intrinsically, irrespective of his or her nationality, material capacities, intellectual capacities, and I think that's hugely significant in a world where young people already, through social media, are under pressure—pressure to perform, to curate the image of themselves, to earn attention.'

The 'civilization of love' that Pope Leo encourages us to envision as we respond to the challenges posed by AI begins 'with a recognition that our dignity, our worth, is intrinsic', Bishop Tighe said. 'God loves us as we are, loves us unconditionally, and in a world which is quite conditional in everything it attributes to us, I think that's hugely significant.'

https://melbournecatholic.org/news/civilisation-of-love-webinar-affirms-human-limits-and-dignity-in-the-age-of-ai

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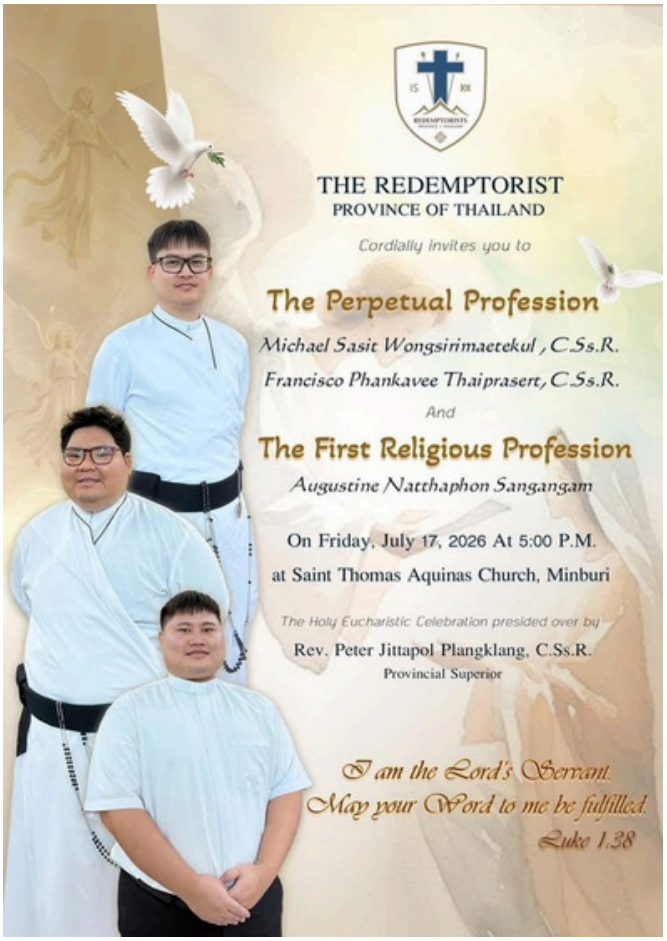
Announcements & Other Events



SRC Appeal

We humbly request student donations to stock our Common Room weekly with coffee/tea, fresh milk, biscuits, and cup noodles.

We suggest a donation of $20 per student, per semester. That said, we welcome any amount you feel comfortable contributing; no amount is too little.

Envelopes are available in the Common Room, the YTU Office, and classrooms. if you'd like to contribute by EFT (Electronic Funds Transfer), contact Mengjie, our SRC Treasurer, at mengjie0107@gmail.com