

The Psycho-Spiritual Crisis of the Digital Age: A Critical Review of *Magnifica Humanitas*

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Abstract

Digital technologies, social media, and artificial intelligence are now driving our attention, communication, identity formation, decision-making, and access to knowledge. Their influence is neither as good nor as bad as it seems in the media and the narrative, and the outcomes are not always identical. This article focuses on Pope Leo XIV's 2026 encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*. It critically analyses its theological anthropology in light of contemporary research on digital well-being, loneliness, adolescent identity, cognitive attention, disinformation, and human-AI interaction. The analysis argues that the most appropriate and reasonable way to describe the current problem is to recognise that it is not a universal psychological pathology produced by technology, but rather an anthropological and moral problem exacerbated by digital life. The theological distinction between Babel and Jerusalem offers a theological perspective to evaluate whether technologies promote domination, homogenisation and reductionism or, on the contrary, encourage participation, solidarity, truth and the common good. The paper highlights attention and interiority, digitally mediated identity, loneliness and communion, delegation of judgement to AI, truth and shared reality, based on development. The article concludes that a credible Christian response should neither romanticise pre-digital life nor be dismissive of technological innovation. However, it should instead build human judgement, embodied community, moral responsibility, contemplative practices, and institutional forms of technology governance. The limitations of the existing evidence are both in correlational studies and in the limited data on the correlation

between digital practices and explicitly religious and spiritual outcomes.

Keywords: *Magnifica Humanitas*, artificial intelligence, digital culture, psycho-spiritual crisis, human dignity, digital anthropology, loneliness, identity, Christian humanism

Introduction

Digital technologies have become infrastructures through which people communicate, learn, work, develop identities, access information, and participate in religious and civic life. Artificial intelligence has further advanced this transition by generating language, images, recommendations, and decisions at a scale and speed that are changing our daily knowledge and decision-making practices. However, the empirical evidence does not support a binary view of digital technology as either liberating or destroying human beings. According to an overview of research on adolescents, for example, the mental health of social media users is influenced by individuals, their behaviour, content, and platform architecture (Sala et al., 2024). A recent meta-analysis found that social media use is associated with loneliness, but that problematic use is associated with loneliness more than social media-only time (Feng et al., 2026). In this contested empirical context, Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas* offers a theological and ethical perspective rather than a psychological diagnosis. The encyclical, issued on 25 May 2026 and signed on 15 May 2026, presents artificial intelligence as a new reality and as one that affects human dignity, conscience, freedom, solidarity, and the common good (Leo XIV, 2026). Its central biblical concept is that of the Tower of Babel and rebuilding Jerusalem; there is technological power that is not in communion but in the service of self-sufficiency, and it is someone responsible for the reconstruction of society, dialogue and togetherness to bring about humanity's happiness (Leo XIV, 2026, paras. 7-10). The argument in *Magnifica Humanitas* would be most useful if it were anthropological in nature. It does not accept the reductionist view of the person as data, performance, preference, or computational output. Still, it puts technological questions at the centre of a larger truth: freedom, relationship, embodiment, responsibility, and transcendence.

The Digital Age as an Anthropological Turning Point

Every technological change shakes up practices and institutions. Still, digital technologies have a particular link to cognition and

communication because they are constantly embedded in the information environment in which people live, remember, interact, and decide. Research on digital cognition is concerned with both technological determinism and technological indifference: digital technologies do change cognition and cognition patterns without leading to a universal and uniform decline in cognition (Cecutti et al., 2021). In the study of digital technology, social media, and AI, attention, memory, learning, decision-making, and critical thinking are considered areas where the effects of digital technologies are complex, variable, and interdependent (Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu, 2023). *Magnifica Humanitas* views the change in this digital technology in terms of discernment. The encyclical states that technology can be evaluated not only based on capability or efficiency but also based on dignity, freedom, participation, and the common good (Leo XIV, 2026, paras. 80-96). It also avoids the opposite error of treating technology as intrinsically evil. The issue is the orientation of technological power and the institutional structures through which that power is exercised.

Digital Reductionism and the Problem of the Person

One of the encyclical's major assertions is that a digital language cannot satisfy the mystery of the human person. *Magnifica Humanitas* cautions against reducing people to data and performance, and against viewing computational representations as a complete account of human identity (Leo XIV, 2026, paras. 10, 97-99). This concern can be related to research showing that algorithms are conditioned by data representations and design choices that reflect limitations, biases, or incomplete models of human situations. Bender et al. (2021) warn that large language models should not be considered human in their statistical production of language, and research on AI-human collaboration finds that users are prone to overreliance on automated recommendations. The theological argument is stronger than the technological observation. Peoplehood, according to a Christian view, is not about information-processing capacity but about being in the image of God. The Second Vatican Council affirms that the human person is made in the image of God and that the mystery of the human person must be understood and interpreted in relation to the Incarnate Word (Second Vatican Council 1965a, 1965b).

Some people may find human-AI interaction socially meaningful, but research does not support the claim that each interaction with a chatbot

is inherently alienating. A randomised longitudinal study did not show a general decline in social health after 21 days of companion-chatbot use, while greater anthropomorphism was associated with better perceived effects on human relationships (Guingrich & Graziano, 2025). A 12-month study found that greater chatbot companionship was associated with loneliness on one measure, and lower social connection was associated with chatbot use in the following year (Folk & Dunn, 2026). The natural conclusion here is not that AI companions would replace human relationships, but that anthropomorphism, loneliness, and the design of human-AI interaction need to be studied and addressed in an ongoing and ethical way.

Hyperconnectivity, Loneliness, and Communion

A broad review finds that social media outcomes are determined by the style of use, individual characteristics, content, and platform structure rather than exposure of time alone (Sala et al., 2024). These results should be phrased with greater care than the idea that social media only ‘cause’ isolation. A link between social media use and loneliness is effective, but the extent and direction of the effects vary considerably across studies and different types of media use (Feng et al., 2026). *Magnifica Humanitas* provides a theological vocabulary to describe the quality of connection. In contrast to Babel and Jerusalem, communication is human when it is directed toward communion, a sense of common responsibility, and people as persons, not just as viewers, consumers, or data points (Leo XIV, 2026, paras. 151-164). This fits with research on young religious users that has shown that digital spaces can strengthen belonging, especially for those who see themselves as members of religious minorities, but also, to a degree, to a homogeneity of content that can stifle interreligious interaction (Grassi & Gerlitz, 2022). Communion should not be limited to physical proximity. Digital communication can also build connections, help people access communities they might not otherwise reach, and be a way to make friends across the globe. The theological challenge is more precise: digital connection should complement rather than replace reciprocity, embodied presence, responsibility, and sharing life through which communities become more than networks of preference.

Attention, Silence, and Interior Life

Attention is a particularly important link between psychological and spiritual analysis. Human attention is limited, and digital environments can lead to repeated interruptions, rapid switching and competing

informational demands. Studies indicate that attention and cognitive control are important domains affected by intensive digital engagement, yet there is still little evidence of lasting global cognitive damage (Cecutti et al., 2021; Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu, 2023). The research challenge is therefore not to claim that smartphones have destroyed attention, but to examine how specific design features influence attention, task switching, and the capacity to engage deeply with difficult work. *Magnifica Humanitas* gives this problem a spiritual dimension. It clearly connects healthy education to silence, deep study, reading, and careful analysis, and warns that if information is not connected to deeper knowledge, inner freedom is compromised (Leo XIV, 2026, paras. 146-147). The theological significance of silence is not just that silence is soothing. In Christian spirituality, silence is about prayer, self-reflection and attention to God and neighbour. The psychological argument and the theological one should be distinct: empirical research can investigate attentional control and well-being, while theology sees silence as a practice of freedom, discernment, and a willingness to transcend. Automation bias¹ has been identified by a recent academic review as a major issue in human-AI cooperation, especially in highly competitive environments (Romeo & Conti, 2026). So the best educational response should not be to ban AI but to inform the user about when to accept, question, verify and reject machine results.

Digital Identity and the Reconstruction of the Self

Digital culture also changes the social conditions in which identity is negotiated. Social media profiles make self-representation visible, persistent, and responsive to audience feedback. On the other hand, there is no evidence in the literature of online self-presentation as a form of authentic self-presentation. A review of 32 studies involving 19,658 adolescents found that active participation was associated with identity exploration; authenticity, rather than idealised self-presentation, was associated with greater self-concept clarity, whereas social comparison was associated with identity exploration and identity distress (Avci et al., 2025). This evidence suggests that visibility is not

¹ **Automation bias** refers to the tendency of individuals to overly rely on recommendations, decisions, or outputs generated by automated systems, sometimes accepting them without sufficient critical evaluation. In contexts involving artificial intelligence and decision-support technologies, automation bias may lead users to overlook errors or contradictory evidence because of an assumed level of accuracy or objectivity attributed to the system.

the actual problem, but the circumstances under which visibility becomes the defining measure of worth. If identity is based on metrics of attention, popularity or engagement, there can be a conflict between lived identity and performed identity. Christian anthropology provides a different normative starting point: dignity precedes performance. The human person is not valuable because an audience has measured or validated that person. *Magnifica Humanitas* thus provides a theological criterion by which digital systems can be assessed: do they support the person's freedom and dignity, or do they turn people into something we can use for prediction, monetisation, or behavioural optimisation? (Leo XIV, 2026, paras. 162, 447-450).

Artificial Intelligence and the Delegation of Human Judgment

AI can process large datasets, understand patterns, summarise information, produce content, and aid in decision-making. These capabilities have legitimate benefits in education, research, medicine, administration and creative work. The issue of ethical responsibility is not that AI is good, but it must be able to strike a balance between human agents and automated systems. Automation bias is a tendency to accept automated recommendations too readily, though findings vary across contexts and do not always show that humans consistently defer to algorithms (Romeo & Conti, 2026; Veale et al., 2023).

Magnifica Humanitas distinguishes between computational ability and wisdom. It argues that AI may perform some information-processing tasks, but it remains dependent on human needs, data, institutional choices, and moral oversight (Leo XIV, 2026, paras. 97-111). This is particularly true for moral and existential questions. A system can make a reasonable recommendation about what to do without having to own the responsibility for why that action should be taken. Human judgment cannot be reduced to the choice of a good output. The ethical goal, then, is interpretive sovereignty: the ability of people to understand, assess and take action.

Truth, Disinformation, and Shared Reality

Digital platforms have increased access to information, but also the speed and scale at which false or misleading information spreads. Aimeur et al. (2023) identify misinformation, disinformation, and deceptive content as major problems in social networks. Synthetic media adds a layer of difficulty, as AI-generated or manipulated content can make it harder to tell whether something is genuine or fake. *Magnifica Humanitas* sees truth not just as the possession of correct

propositions but as a social good crucial to trustworthy relationships and democratic life. It pays particular attention to truth, communication and the collective imagination (Leo XIV, 2026, paras. 131-150). This theological formulation is a complement to, not a substitute for, the technical requirements of verification, provenance, platform accountability and media literacy. A sound response to disinformation must be based on epistemic competence² and moral conviction: people must know not only how to verify claims but also how to resist the incentives that reward outrage, impulsive sharing and manipulation.

Embodiment, Incarnation, and Transcendence

Digital devices can break the connection between consciousness and embodiment, making communication, work, education, worship, and social interaction more accessible through screens. This is indeed good for people who are geographically separated or physically unattached. It would therefore be deceptive to paint virtual participation as inferior. The more accurate theological question that arises is what forms of human presence are lost when mediated interaction becomes the default rather than one of several. In Christian theology, embodiment is of the highest importance because the Incarnation brings us into physical presence. *Magnifica Humanitas* directly contrasts Christian anthropology with visions of an enhanced or disembodied humanity and interprets the Incarnation as a theological affirmation of vulnerability, dependence, and relational presence (Leo XIV, 2026, paras. 229-232). This does not require rejecting digital mediation. It suggests that technological convenience should not be a reason to view limitations in bodily function, ageing, fatigue, reliance, and physical community as flaws to be eliminated. The Christian story of human flourishing is relational and lived, not just information.

Youth, Digital Culture, and Religious Identity

Youth are especially important to this discussion because adolescence and emerging adulthood are periods of identity development, experimentation, a sense of belonging, and moral formation. Ferreira et al. (2026) systematically reviewed research on emerging technologies and adolescent well-being and religious identity, covering

² Epistemic competence refers to the capacity to critically evaluate, interpret, justify, and appropriately apply knowledge and information. It includes the ability to assess the reliability of sources, distinguish between justified and unjustified claims, recognize uncertainty and limitations, and exercise sound judgment in forming or revising beliefs.

deepfakes, gaming, the metaverse, virtual reality, and chat applications. Their review found both opportunities and risks and emphasised the scarcity of research explicitly addressing religion-technology interactions. This qualification is important because the available evidence is insufficient to claim that digital culture uniformly damages religious identity.

A more defensible proposal is therefore one of formation rather than technological avoidance. Young people require digital literacy, but they also require epistemic, ethical, and spiritual literacy. They should be taught to recognise algorithmic mediation, evaluate sources, distinguish influence from evidence, understand how online self-presentation affects identity, and recognise the difference between simulated companionship and reciprocal human relationships. Religious communities can contribute by providing embodied belonging, intergenerational relationships, sacramental participation, moral discernment, and practices of silence that are not reducible to online engagement. The Church should consequently avoid two opposite errors: technological panic and technological naivety. The first assumes that digital culture is inherently destructive; the second assumes that technical innovation is automatically progress.

From Babel to Jerusalem: A Theology of Digital Discernment

Magnifica Humanitas makes its most impact with its pair of Babel and Jerusalem. Babel is a collective technological project without humility: it is based on self-sufficiency, uniformity, power, and the sacrifice of dignity for efficiency. Jerusalem is rebuilt individually by collective responsibility, listening, plurality and communion (Leo XIV, 2026, paras. 151-164). The encyclical returns to this imagery and asks, ‘What are we building?’ as technological progress changes relationships, institutions, and forms of power (Leo XIV, 2026, para. 90). The images can be translated into a practical framework for digital understanding. A Babel-oriented system in which power is concentrated, transparency is weak, people are reduced to data or market segments, and efficiency takes over responsibility. A Jerusalem-oriented system seeks participation, accountability, protection of vulnerable persons, transparency, plural voices and the common good. This is not a claim that technology is morally neutral or non-neutral in every philosophical sense; it is a claim that technological systems are socially embedded and acquire their practical meaning through design, ownership, regulation, deployment and use. This also requires attention to

evidence. The encyclical is a normative theological framework, and empirical research offers evidence of specific psychological and social outcomes.

Toward a Civilisation of Love in the Digital Age

The more constructive alternative proposed by *Magnifica Humanitas* is ‘civilisation of love’, in which technological power is directed towards human dignity, solidarity, truth, freedom, and the common good (Leo XIV, 2026, paras. 229-243). It is an extension of Catholic social teaching from the social philosophy of *Gaudium et Spes* that focuses on human dignity, social humanity, and social life; *Caritas in Veritate* links technology development to the human being and charity in the truth; *Laudato Si* critiques a technocratic model which allows efficiency and control to become the main criteria of evaluation; *Fratelli Tutti* argues for a social friendship and fraternity (Benedict XVI, 2009; Francis, 2015, 2020; Second Vatican Council, 1965b, Leo XIV, 2026, para. 22-44).

A civilisation of love in digital ethics has an array of practical dimensions that can be translated into digital ethics. First, it acknowledges people beyond those who belong to the platforms or institutions they belong to. Second, it protects vulnerable groups from exploitation, exclusion and manipulation. Third, it treats truth as part of the common good rather than merely an object of attention. Fourth, it preserves meaningful human responsibility when AI is used to make decisions that affect humans. Fifth, it provides for embodied and communal practices that cannot be fully replaced with mediated interaction. Finally, it builds institutions to govern technological power instead of leaving it to market forces. It is more credible when this is done with limits in mind. The evidence reviewed here does not show that digital technology produces a single psycho-spiritual disorder, and AI does not necessarily lead to social isolation, loss of faith or lack of moral reasoning. The conclusion is that digital environments change the conditions under which attention, identity, relationships, knowledge and judgment are exercised. These changes create new potential and new vulnerabilities. The theological task is to discern how those conditions can be ordered toward human flourishing.

Conclusion

The psycho-spiritual crisis of the digital age can be seen as an anthropological and ethical challenge, not as an outcome of exposure to technology. Recent research has indicated that social media use,

digital identity practices, attention demands, loneliness, and human-AI interaction can have both positive and negative effects and are influenced by context and practice (Avci et al., 2025; Feng et al., 2026; Sala et al., 2024).

Magnifica Humanitas is a theological view of this matter, as it asks whether technological development is good for the person or limits us to information, performance, preference, and economic value. Babel-Jerusalem is the brief way to put it. The challenge of the present generation is not just to manage AI better. It is to develop intelligence connected with wisdom, responsibility, freedom and love. Human dignity must become the basis for measuring technological advancement. *Magnifica Humanitas* does not call on humanity to retreat from technology but to stay human with technology.

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