

“Remaining Human”: Leadership and Leadership Formation in *Magnifica Humanitas*¹

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Abstract

Magnifica Humanitas (Leo XIV, 2026) addresses the safeguarding of the human person in the age of artificial intelligence, and does so largely through an analysis of power: who holds it, how it is concentrated, and what its proper use requires. This article expounds the vision of leadership and of leadership formation that the encyclical proposes, reading it within the tradition of the Church’s documents on formation and ecclesiastical studies from *Optatam Totius* (1965) to *Veritatis Gaudium* (2017). The encyclical’s governing criterion is anthropological: authority is measured by whether those subject to it are recognised as persons rather than functions, and become more fully human under it. From this criterion the article traces the encyclical’s account of the leader’s self-understanding, marked by service, accepted limit, and the ordering of love; its account of the exercise of authority through discernment, distributed responsibility, and judgement that cannot be computed; its account of answerability, evaluation, and institutional memory; and its account of what the formation of leaders now requires, including integration of knowledge, a discipline of restraint, and a communicative formation adequate to a polarised public sphere.

Keywords: ecclesial leadership, human dignity, *munus regendi*, artificial intelligence, formation, *Magnifica Humanitas*

¹ The title quotes a section heading of *Magnifica Humanitas* (Leo XIV, 2026), preceding no. 15.

Introduction

Leadership is not a heading in *Magnifica Humanitas*, but it is among its persistent concerns. The encyclical asks “who holds this power today and how they use it” (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 5); it describes a “culture of power” in which “the availability of resources and the ability to dominate tend to dictate the agenda and criteria for decision-making” (no. 188); and it recalls Guardini’s judgement, as cited in the encyclical, that “contemporary man has not been trained to use power well” (no. 93). Since the encyclical’s stated purpose is the safeguarding of the human person, its treatment of power is subordinate to an anthropological end rather than independent of it.

The Church’s documents on formation supply the tradition within which such a text is read. They carry a definite understanding of ecclesial authority: the *munus regendi* as the capacity “to coordinate all the gifts and charisms which the Spirit inspires in the community, to discern them and to put them to good use” (John Paul II, 1992, no. 26); authority as *amoris officium*, exercised without “lording it over” the flock (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016, no. 34); the seminarian formed to “see himself as a group leader and to be present as a man of communion” (no. 119); the rector to whom it falls to define the community’s “common good” clearly, to make it seen and understood and loved, to draw the students into defining it where it is obscure, and finally “to decide with authority and without hesitation” (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1980).

This article asks what vision of leadership and of the formation of leaders *Magnifica Humanitas* proposes, and how that vision fits within this tradition.

Method

The study² is a close reading of the encyclical, read within an established documentary tradition. The primary text is *Magnifica Humanitas*, examined in its entirety, with coding of all material bearing on authority, power, governance, decision-making, participation, evaluation, and education. The interpretive background comprises the Church’s documents on formation and ecclesiastical studies: *Optatam*

² *Declaration on the use of generative AI*: In preparing this article the author used a generative AI assistant for translation from Italian and for drafting and structuring support. The author reviewed and verified all content and takes full responsibility for the final text.

Totius; Sapientia Christiana (1979) and *Veritatis Gaudium* (2017); *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992); the *Ratio Fundamental* (2016); and the instructions and directives of the Congregation for Catholic Education on philosophy (1972, 2011), theology (1979), liturgy (1979), spiritual formation (1980), social communications (1986), Marian formation (1988), the Fathers (1989), religious institutes (1990), seminary educators (1993), the ecumenical dimension (1997) and higher institutes of religious sciences (2008). These are used to situate and illuminate the encyclical's teaching, not as terms of a systematic comparison. The instruction on liturgical formation in seminaries (1979), the circular letter on spiritual formation in seminaries (1980) and the directives concerning the preparation of seminary educators (1993) are cited from their Italian texts; renderings into English are the author's, prepared with the assistance of a generative AI tool and checked against the Italian originals.

The sections that follow bring to light some elements of the encyclical's leadership vision and its bearing on the formation of leaders.

The Measure of Authority: The Human Person

The encyclical supplies an explicit test for any exercise of power, taken from John Paul II: does it make "human life on earth 'more human' in every aspect of that life"? Does it make it "more worthy of man"? (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 129). Put as a question of discernment, it asks whether innovations "truly help individuals and peoples to become more humane and fraternal" (no. 85).

What this criterion protects is stated with unusual precision. Beneath moral, social and existential dignity lies "ontological dignity," belonging to every person "simply by virtue of existing, of having been willed, created and loved by God" (no. 52), so that dignity is "neither acquired nor earned, nor does it need to be justified" (no. 53). The encyclical then names as "particularly insidious" the ideology "that suggests that every person must earn or justify his or her own worth, to the point of attributing greater value to those who are more efficient or effective," with the result that persons are "reduced to a means of achieving results, a resource to be used and exploited" (no. 51).

From this follows the encyclical's most compressed statement of what leadership is for: "The quality of a civilisation is measured not by the power of its means, but by the care it can offer, by its ability to

recognise the other as a face not merely as a function” (no. 114). Where efficiency becomes the ultimate measure, “human beings are tempted to see themselves as a project to be optimised rather than as persons called to relationship and communion” (no. 112).

This is continuous with, and gives content to, the tradition’s insistence that the human person “always remains the ‘way for the Church’” (no. 50, recalling *Redemptor Hominis*) — the principle by which formation documents subordinate institutional convenience to the growth of the person being formed. Its bearing on ecclesial practice is direct wherever the Church judges persons: in scrutinies, periodic assessments and reports, worth may not be indexed to performance.

Service, Limit, and the Ordering of Love

The encyclical’s account of the leader is austere. Authority has no independent standing: “Every power is at the service of communion. All authority is at the service of the People of God” (no. 89) — the formulation to which *Pastores Dabo Vobis* had given its kenotic ground, holding that “the authority of Jesus Christ as head coincides then with his service, with his gift” (John Paul II, 1992, no. 21).

Two features are distinctive. The first is the acceptance of limits. Incapacity, illness, ageing, suffering and vulnerability “tend to be seen primarily as a defect to be corrected, rather than as a reality through which our humanity matures and opens itself to relationship” (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 118). Against a culture of optimisation, the encyclical holds that “humanity flourishes not despite limitations, but often through them,” and that the authentic transcendence of the human condition comes not from “enhanced self-sufficiency, but a relationship that liberates” (nos. 118, 128). A leader so conceived governs from acknowledged finitude. The point is sharpened by contrast: “For an algorithm, an error is a flaw to be corrected; for a person, however, an error can be a catalyst for profound change” (no. 128). This gives a contemporary rationale to what the 1980 instruction on spiritual formation required in ascetical terms — that a priest “cannot see everything, listen to everything, say everything, experience everything,” and that the seminary must have made him capable, “in interior freedom,” of sacrifice and of an intelligent and loyal personal discipline (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1980).

The second is that responsibility is genuinely distributed. No one is dispensed from it: “All are given their own section of the wall:

scientists and researchers, entrepreneurs and workers, educators and legislators, civil society, popular movements and faith communities,” and “no one is so weak that they cannot play their part” (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 13). Against the resignation that presents itself as realism, the encyclical insists that “no one is without responsibility. We all have our own areas for action” (no. 212).

Beneath both lies the encyclical’s account of what finally determines governance. Recalling Augustine’s two cities, Leo XIV writes that our practice in relationships, work and institutions “reveals our fundamental values,” and that “in the end, it all stems from what we hold most dear” (no. 130). Leadership is thus an ordering of love before it is a competence — a claim that locates the formation of leaders in the spiritual dimension as much as the pastoral.

The Exercise of Authority: Discernment, Participation, and What Cannot Be Delegated

The encyclical’s model of governance is drawn from Nehemiah, whose method it recounts in operational detail: he prayed and interceded before acting; he “examined the destroyed areas in silence”; he “did not impose solutions from above”; he “convened the families, assigned each of them a section of the wall to rebuild, listened to their concerns, coordinated their efforts and addressed any opposition”; and the work “rebuilds relationships before rebuilding with stones” (no. 8). At the conclusion this becomes a vocational paradigm uniting “listening and courage, prayer and responsibility” (no. 241). It answers to the coordinating office described in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* no. 26 by supplying a sequence: discern, survey, distribute, listen, coordinate, and expect opposition rather than suppress it.

Subsidiarity gives the principle its institutional form. Higher-level institutions “must recognize, protect and promote the freedom and creativity of lower-level entities, coordinating their contributions” (no. 68), and subsidiarity “does not justify the State’s disengagement, but rather guides its actions” (no. 69). Decisions belong “at the closest level possible to the persons involved,” so that people are not “presented with decisions that have already been taken” (no. 70). Within the Church this requires participation “through genuine, rather than merely nominal, participatory bodies” and the avoidance of “any form of paternalism that suffocates evangelical freedom” (no. 87) — a criterion applicable to the collegial structures that *Veritatis Gaudium* requires statutes to define (Francis, 2017, arts. 19–20), and to the seminary’s

équipes educanti, whose necessity the 1993 *Directives* affirm (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1993, nos. 11, 40).

Method matters as much as structure. Social doctrine, the encyclical insists, “is not a handbook of principles and norms to be applied, but a process of shared discernment” (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 27), and it demonstrates the method at no 109, where each principle generates a specific diagnostic question about a concrete situation.

The encyclical then marks the boundary of delegation. Automated systems do not know “compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and above all, the hope that people can change” (no. 102); entrusting to an algorithm “the power to select who is worthy or not, without anyone bearing responsibility for that judgment” causes exclusion to be “cloaked in a veneer of neutrality and objectivity, against which it becomes difficult to raise objections” (no. 103). Moral judgement “cannot be reduced to calculation, for it involves conscience, personal responsibility and the recognition of the other as a person” (no. 198). The criteria that follow include a traceable chain of responsibility; a moral timeframe, since “speed and efficiency should never be the supreme motivating force” for irreversible decisions; and the refusal to let accountability be “collapsed into ‘the machine’” (nos. 199–200). Ecclesial practice supplies an immediate instance: the *Ratio* requires that suitability for orders be established by “positive arguments” giving moral certainty, “and not simply the absence of problematic situations” (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016, no. 206) — a judgement about whether a person can grow, of precisely the kind the encyclical says cannot be computed.

Answerability and Memory

Accountability, as the encyclical defines it, is “the possibility of identifying who must ‘account’ for decisions, justify them, monitor them, and, when necessary, challenge them and remedy any harm caused” (no. 105). Its rationale is anthropological, not managerial: decisions must be “understandable, contestable and subject to oversight, so that individuals are not reduced to mere profiles” (no. 164). Contestability follows from dignity.

Turned upon the Church, this yields the *examen* of nos. 86–89, in which the encyclical, endorsing the Final Document of the 2024 Synod, identifies transparency, accountability and evaluation as “key practices for missionary transformation” (no. 86). It asks that “regular assessments of the exercise of ministerial responsibilities should be

encouraged, not as judgments on individuals, but as tools for learning and correction oriented toward mission,” and includes among the requirements of justice the listening to victims of “spiritual, economic, institutional, sexual and power-based abuse, as well as abuses of conscience” (no. 89).

To this, the encyclical joins a disposition of memory. Acknowledging the delay with which the Church condemned slavery, and that the Apostolic See at times “intervened several times in order to regulate and legitimize forms of subjugation,” Leo XIV names “a wound in Christian memory, one from which we cannot consider ourselves detached,” asks pardon, and converts the memory into a criterion of present governance: past complicity “becomes a call to vigilance,” so that we may “avoid the need to ask for pardon again in the future” (nos. 176–177).

The Formation of Leaders

The encyclical addresses educational institutions directly, asking universities and academic bodies “to give fresh impetus to these principles” and to apply them to the digital revolution (no. 47), and identifying the principal challenge of universities as “the integration of knowledge, cultivating both the capacity to connect and synthesise knowledge to grasp complexity, and the skills necessary to verify facts” (no. 137). This is the concern that *Veritatis Gaudium* had named as the want of “a guiding synthesis” (Francis, 2017, no. 4c) and that the *Ratio* renders as the requirement that disciplines be taught so that “their intimate connection stands out clearly, avoiding fragmentation” (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016, no. 153).

Several formative requirements follow. The encyclical warns of an educational system “lacking in a love for truth” in which “an incessant flow of information replaces the essential exercise of research, reflection and discernment,” producing people who “know many things” but cannot find direction (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 146). Against this, it commends “rhythms that incorporate silence, in-depth study, reading and judicious analysis, for without these elements inner freedom may be compromised” (no. 146), and, citing Plato, it holds that understanding is kindled only through prolonged discursive engagement with others (no. 140). From this comes a competence of restraint: education in these tools “involves teaching them to decide when and for what purpose it ought not to be used” (no. 140). Continuing formation of teachers is required so that they may help

students use new technologies “responsibly, critically and creatively, rather than passively succumbing to their influence” (no. 145).

The formation of the leader’s word receives comparable attention. “Let us disarm words, and we will help to disarm the world” (no. 214); leaders are to reject “the Manichean notions so typical of that mindset of violence that divides the world into those who are good and those who are evil” (no. 222). They are to cultivate a “healthy realism” distinct both from an idealism that selects its facts and from “a debased form of realism that confuses observation with resignation” (no. 218). The encyclical notes that public opinion is shaped by “polarising media narratives, which are often amplified by algorithms that prioritise conflict and confrontation” (no. 190). This extends a formative concern already present in the tradition: the preparation of students for “the future office of pastor and of president of the liturgical assembly,” including “the art of speaking and expressing themselves with gesture and actions” (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1979a, nos. 20, 58), and the seminary understood as a school of communication in which formators must themselves be capable communicators (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1993, no. 39).

Finally, the encyclical distributes formative responsibility widely. It calls for “an alliance among policy-makers, educational institutions and families” (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 142) and for adults to “rediscover their vocation as artisans of education” (no. 238). It addresses researchers, entrepreneurs, investors, academic authorities and politicians, warning that those who “limit themselves to looking only at their own sector” may “deceive themselves into believing they are performing actions that are morally neutral” (no. 209). It tells developers that “every design choice reflects a vision of humanity” (no. 111). Taken with the encyclical’s appeal to academic institutions and universities (no. 47) and its insistence that responsibility falls on scientists, entrepreneurs, educators and legislators alike (no. 13), this suggests that leadership formation is not exhausted by the preparation of candidates for orders — a widening for which the Reform of the Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2008, no. 3, art. 2) offers an existing instrument.

Conclusion

The vision is coherent, and its coherence lies in the subordination of every governance question to the anthropological criterion of no. 129. Accountability, participation, restraint and memory are not

administrative virtues in this text; each is required because persons are not functions. The encyclical is itself attuned to the pace of change, noting that “any statement regarding AI risks becoming quickly outdated” (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 98) — a reason to ground the formation of leaders in its anthropology rather than in its technological descriptions.

The leadership vision of *Magnifica Humanitas* is anthropological before it is institutional. Authority is service, exercised from acknowledged limit, ordered by what the one who governs loves, distributed rather than concentrated, answerable rather than opaque, and finally measured by whether those subject to it are recognised as a face and not a function. Its vision of leadership formation follows: an education that integrates rather than fragments, that trains judgement and restraint alongside competence, that forms the word as an instrument of encounter, and that reaches beyond the ordained to all who hold responsibility.

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