

AI: Should the Pope be worried?

Published: May 28, 2026, 6:03 am

Pope Leo XIV has issued his first major encyclical, and despite headlines claiming it is about AI, this video argues that its real subject is power.

Who controls artificial intelligence? Who benefits from it? Who is excluded from decision-making? And can democracy survive when a handful of corporations control the digital systems that increasingly shape our lives? Those are the questions the Pope is really asking.

In this video, I explore the political economy behind the Pope's argument, linking it back to Pope Leo XIII's response to the industrial revolution in *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. The comparison is striking: then it was in factories and industrial capitalism that power was concentrated; now it is in algorithms, data centres and platform monopolies. The technologies have changed, but the concentration of power has not. If anything, it has intensified.

This, then, is not really a debate about technology at all. It is a debate about democracy, accountability, ownership, inequality, work, and whether governments still govern in the public interest.

The Pope argues that human beings must never be reduced to data points or economic inputs. He warns that AI cannot make moral judgments, and that technological progress without democratic control risks deepening inequality and undermining freedom itself. At the same time, he is also asking whether elected governments still have meaningful authority when unelected corporations increasingly control the infrastructure through which information, communication and decision-making now flow.

The encyclical raises profound questions. It challenges the idea that technology is neutral, and instead insists that all technologies reflect political choices about ownership, governance and power.

So, why are governments so reluctant to regulate AI corporations when they know markets do not automatically defend freedom? And why may democratic intervention

be urgently required if society is to retain any meaningful control over the future being created around us?

Whether you are religious or not, these are among the most important political economy questions of our time.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GcBBck4zug?si=g2W6218xdASOj4a2>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=64hgy-1ad456a-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&font=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

The Debate Ammunition for this video is available here.

This is the transcript:

Pope Leo XIV has issued his first paper encyclical, and it's about AI, artificial intelligence. But my suggestion is that to say that's what it's about is wrong.

Now, I'm not saying I've read all 42,000 words in this encyclical as yet, but I have read bits of it, and I've read a lot of reports, and this is not really about technology at all.

This is a document about power, who holds it, who exercises it, and who is, most importantly, as far as the church is concerned, left out of it. The real question the Pope is asking is whether democracy can survive the digital age. That is the question this video is going to answer.

Now, let me just contextualise this. Leo XIV deliberately named himself after the 19th century Pope Leo XIII, who in 1891 issued an encyclical called 'Rerum Novarum', and I hope I've got my Latin right, which responded to the consequences of the industrial revolution.

At that time, the challenge was the concentration of power created by industrial capitalism. Leo XIV, who sees himself as the obvious heir to his namesake, is saying we face a remarkably similar challenge today. The power of steam engines and factories

has now become the power of algorithms and data centres. The concentration of power has not gone away. If anything, it has intensified.

And the real problem is not whether artificial intelligence is good or bad. It's a technology: we could impose our values on it, as we will. The real problem with artificial intelligence is who controls it, and that distinction matters enormously.

A small number of corporations already control vast quantities of data as a consequence of the growth of AI. They are already dominating the digital infrastructure across the world, and they are going to increasingly shape the information people see and the choices that they make.

AI is being built inside systems that already include profound imbalances of power. Appreciating this is important. There is a tendency to treat technological innovation as somehow neutral, but that assumption is based upon the idea that society simply has to adapt to whatever technology delivers. Leo XIV is quite explicitly rejecting that idea.

He is saying technology is always embedded within social systems, and it always reflects the choices that we make as societies about ownership, governance, accountability, and power, the issues that are at the absolute core of political economy. And in this context, artificial intelligence is not just about determining our future. The Pope is saying it is about something more important than that. It is about how some people are choosing to shape that future. And when we say people are shaping the future, we have to be honest about which people.

A very small number of individuals and corporations are making the decisions that matter. The rest of us are largely objects to be managed rather than subjects making choices in this world that they are creating. That asymmetry is the central political economy problem of our age. It is not a technical problem. It is a problem of power and government. And Pope Leo XIV's clarity in naming this is incredibly valuable.

The Pope is saying human beings must never be reduced to data points or economic inputs. Human dignity requires that people remain the subjects of decision-making. This he says, matters in healthcare, in education, in employment, in criminal justice, and anywhere where decisions affect human lives. Algorithms cannot exercise moral judgment, and the issue he sees is that increasingly they're being asked to. The encyclical insists that this is not acceptable, and that is where he draws his dividing line between his ethics and those of AI, and that's an incredibly important distinction.

This is also important because the encyclical seems to be particularly concerned about what AI means for work. The history of capitalism is often told as a story of technological progress and rising prosperity, but what that story usually omits is that the benefits rarely distribute themselves fairly, let alone automatically. Gains have consistently accrued to those who own capital, and those whose labour is displaced by that capital have usually borne most of the cost. We all know that. We've all seen that,

and artificial intelligence raises exactly the same question all over again, except this time the potential stakes are bigger than they ever have been before.

Who benefits is the central question that must be asked about artificial intelligence.

If AI becomes another mechanism for concentrating wealth, it will deepen inequality, and the Pope is most certainly worried about that.

If it destroys livelihoods without providing security or dignity in return, it will have failed humanity. This is again, high on the Pope's lists of worries, and technological progress is not very clearly an end in itself. It must be judged by who it serves.

That judgment is a political one and not a technical one, and right now, as I think the Pope is pointing out, most governments are trying to avoid that political judgment.

Around the world, governments appear strangely reluctant to challenge technology corporations. Many believe that regulation might inhibit innovation. What they ignore is that failing to regulate can inhibit democracy. It can inhibit human rights. It can harm human beings. Markets do not automatically protect freedoms, and neither does technology. Both require governance, accountability, and institutions acting in the public interest. The political will to provide that is currently absent almost everywhere. In that case, whether you are Catholic or not, you have to recognise that Leo XIV's encyclical asks some of the most important political economy questions of our age.

He starts with who governs? And then he asks, do elected governments really act for their citizens when they govern society? Or is it now unelected corporations who control data and algorithms that are shaping our future? That is not a question about AI alone; it is a question about democracy itself, and it is the question that I've already noted that most political leaders are refusing to confront. The Pope, and I'm grateful for this, is not.

It would be easy to dismiss this encyclical as a religious intervention in a secular debate; that is how many will wish to frame it. There will be those who will say, "The Pope should stick to religion," but that would be a serious mistake and a serious misreading of Christian teaching, which I do know a bit about. The bookcase on this side of me is full of theology, as much as those behind me are accounting, tax, finance, and economics.

Leo XIV is engaging directly with the political economy of power in the digital age, and he knows the Catholic church has had such engagement in previous ages and that it has been significant. The framing on ownership, on governance, on accountability, dignity and distribution is rigorous, and it's fair. And these are not moral abstractions. They're about practical questions about how society is organised. Anyone working in political economy should take this seriously and heed the warnings.

The warning from Leo XIV is straightforward: that unless we act, others will decide for us. Those who already hold power are already shaping the future in their own interests. The window for democratic intervention is open, but it will only stay open for a short while. We definitely have to act now. Regulation is not the enemy of innovation, he says, and I agree with him, it is the condition for innovation that serves everyone. The question is not whether AI will transform society because it's already doing that. Let's be clear. I know it. It's part of our work practice; we understand that AI can be transformational, but the question is whether that transformation will be governed or merely endured, and whether democracy can survive power on this scale. We have to decide, and we need to do so now.

Good for the Pope, then I say. That's what I think, but what do you think? There is a poll down below. This is an important issue. Please do let us have your comments. This is going to affect your life. Like this video, if that's what you do. Tell me that I shouldn't be talking about this because I'm not techie, if you so wish. I don't care. You have the right to disagree with me. But please do if you do comment, be respectful, because that helps everybody else, and at the same time, please do share this video and if you're so inclined, do please buy us a coffee because that helps us. There's a link down below.

Poll

[poll id="412"]