

Debate ammunition: The Pope's AI encyclical

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The Richard J Murphy YouTube Channel

Debate ammunition

What is the Pope's AI encyclical really about?

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Today's topic

What is the Pope's AI Encyclical Really About?

[See the video here.](#)

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The core argument

Pope Leo XIV's encyclical Magnifica Humanitas is not primarily a document about technology. It is a document about power: who holds it, who exercises it, and who is systematically excluded from it.

Leo XIV argues that artificial intelligence is concentrating decision-making in the hands of a small number of corporations, reducing the rest of humanity to objects to be managed rather than subjects making genuine choices.

The Pope's argument is that unless democratic governments intervene now, the window for governing AI in the public interest will close, and the future will have been shaped, by default, in the interests of those who already hold power.

The argument structure

Step 1 — Industrial history repeating:

Leo XIV deliberately named himself after Leo XIII, whose 1891 encyclical, entitled *Rerum Novarum*, addressed the concentration of power created by the industrial revolution. He argues that AI represents an equivalent rupture: the power of steam engines and factories has become the power of algorithms and data centres, and the concentration of power has not diminished.

Step 2 — Technology is never neutral:

AI is not a free-floating force of nature. It is being built inside systems that already contain profound imbalances of power. Leo XIV rejects the assumption that society must simply adapt to whatever technology delivers; technology always reflects choices about ownership, governance, accountability, and power.

Step 3 — The asymmetry of subjects and objects:

A very small number of individuals and corporations are making the decisions that shape the digital future. The rest of us are increasingly objects to be managed rather than subjects making choices. That asymmetry is the central political economy problem of our age, and it is a problem of power and government, not of engineering.

Step 4 — The window for democratic action:

Governments worldwide are failing to regulate technology corporations, mistakenly treating regulation as the enemy of innovation. Leo XIV argues the opposite: regulation is the condition for innovation that serves everyone. The window for democratic intervention is open, but only for a limited time. We must act now.

Their argument → your rebuttal

They Say Your Response

The Pope should stay out of secular debates. This is a political intervention, and that should not be his concern. Catholic social teaching has engaged with political economy since at least 1891, and much of it has been surprisingly enlightened and radical. Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* shaped labour law, trade union rights, and welfare policy across the Western world. Dismissing this encyclical as religious interference simply reveals an unwillingness to engage with its arguments.

Regulation stifles innovation. Heavy-handed rules will drive AI investment elsewhere and slow growth. Unregulated AI is already concentrating wealth, displacing workers, and undermining democratic accountability. That is not growth; it is extraction. The real question is who benefits from this so-called innovation, because the historical record

shows clearly that gains accrue to capital and costs fall on labour.

AI is just a technology. It can be used for good or ill, and market forces will sort out the bad applications. That argument treats technology as if it exists outside social systems, which it does not. AI is being built by a handful of corporations whose interest is profit, and maybe political power, and not the common good. Market forces produced the industrial revolution's slums and child labour. They did not sort those out unaided either.

The Pope does not understand AI. This encyclical is too vague to be useful policy guidance. The encyclical is not a technical manual; it is a framework of political economy. It asks who governs, who benefits, and who is excluded. Those are precisely the questions most politicians are refusing to confront. Dismissing clear questions as vague is a technique for avoiding them.

The one-liner

“AI is not a technical problem; it is a problem of power, and asking who controls it is the most important political economy question of our age.”

Further reading — Funding the Future blog

Post	Title	Date	Relevance
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[AI won't save us](#) October 2025 **Murphy argues that AI concentrates power in corporate hands, outsources state judgment to algorithms, and abandons democratic accountability, directly paralleling the encyclical's concerns.**

[How to manage the AI economy](#) January 2026 **Examines the distributional consequences of AI, arguing that without political intervention AI will generate more profits with fewer workers, deepening inequality and requiring new fiscal mechanisms.**

[AI is draining our energy](#) January 2026 **Addresses the physical and environmental costs of AI infrastructure, asking who pays and who profits, a question of governance and accountability central to the encyclical's argument.**

[Will AI create a new digital divide and drag the economy down?](#) January 2026

Explores the risk that AI deepens existing inequalities rather than spreading its benefits, reinforcing the encyclical's warning about who AI actually serves.

[The case for AI is out right now](#) January 2025 Critiques the government's growth-first approach to AI, noting that the same official language could have been produced by ChatGPT and fails to engage with questions of power and distribution.

[Pope Leo XIV](#) May 2025 Murphy's earlier assessment of Leo XIV at the moment of his election, identifying his commitment to Catholic social teaching and his likely engagement with AI as a social question in the tradition of Rerum Novarum.