

## MAGISTERIUM

# Magnifica humanitas: the thousand interpretations and a language barrier

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Leo XIV's encyclical '*Magnifica humanitas*' has been received in different ways. Let us give a few examples. Bishop Joseph Strickland offered a very negative interpretation. In contrast, commentator Larry Chapp in *Catholic World Report* spoke of 'a punch in the

stomach, incisive and prophetic'. *The Catholic Thing* took a moderate stance. Leonardo Boff welcomed it for its 'new, contemporary style of argumentation' in *Religion Digital*. Some have accused it of excessive humanism, while others have praised it for resuming discussion of Christ. Some have raised criticisms on specific points; for example, Gerald Murray and Michael Haynes have questioned the revision of Catholic doctrine on just war. Tommaso Scandroglio, writing in the *Nuova Bussola*, applauded the return of metaphysics to the discussion of human dignity, while Roberto de Mattei lamented the lack of a metaphysical perspective on human dignity itself. The traditionalist blog *OnePeterFive* even argued that the return of Thomistic architecture in the encyclical should be welcomed.

**When considering the reasons behind these differing assessments,** it may be helpful to examine the issue of language. The encyclical begins by referring to the Tower of Babel, and we must acknowledge that a certain 'Babel of language' also exists within the Church. This is certainly not a new issue; we have been grappling with it for at least sixty years. The causes are manifold, and evidently Leo XIII's language is affected by this too. The problem of language officially entered the Church with Vatican II. The shift towards existential, experiential and narrative language, rather than metaphysical and definitional language, stems from the significant influence of existentialist philosophy on Catholic theology. Catholic theology also unquestioningly accepted the so-called 'linguistic turn' in modern philosophy, primarily the work of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Under Francis's pontificate, we have witnessed a significant revival of this linguistic shift from nature to history, as the Magisterium now aims to raise doubts, challenge certainties and fuel questions while avoiding answers.

**The theme of language is therefore far-reaching,** but we can limit the discussion to a brief examination of *Magnifica humanitas*, asking whether there are any expressions within it that may have led to different judgements.

**Firstly, we must bear in mind that certain expressions now have very different meanings.** John Paul II and Leo XIV both consider the Church's social doctrine to fall within the framework of 'moral theology', even though one refers to it as a 'doctrinal corpus' and the other as 'communal discernment'. However, moral theology has changed significantly since *Veritatis Splendor*, so the meaning of that classification is unclear. To which moral theology are we referring?

**The "old" John Paul II Institute or the "new"?** To what extent has the new concept of 'discernment' influenced Leo XIV's definition of the Church's social doctrine? To what extent has the new expression 'communal discernment' been affected by this change?

Do the words 'nature' and 'natural' carry the meaning of St Thomas or Heidegger?

**A second issue is the influence of Pope Francis's language on that of Leo XIV.**

These are often cryptic expressions that remain fundamentally ambiguous and can give rise to very different interpretations. Paragraph 25 speaks of truth 'as a gift to be shared and not as a possession to be claimed'. The message is unclear. While it is true that truth is for everyone because it is precisely this that unites us, the idea that the Church cannot claim it in the sense of defending and teaching it seems wrong. One might deduce various attitudes from this sentence, even thinking that sharing constitutes the truth rather than the other way round. This would nullify apologetics.

**It is also interesting to note** that *Rerum Novarum* was less than a third the length of the new encyclical — and that's without taking the 224 footnotes into account.

**This length raises two further issues regarding language.** The first issue stems from the detailed exposition of technical aspects, such as artificial intelligence. *Rerum Novarum*, for example, mentioned trade unions but did not explain how they work, as this was not considered the Pope's role. Francis, on the other hand, devoted a large part of *Laudato si'* to explaining aspects of the environmental issue, largely drawing on reports from the dominant press at the time, even though this was not the Pope's role. The result is very long texts which are, at the same time, more fragile and open to challenge. Indeed, even *Magnifica humanitas* has attracted some technical criticism from artificial intelligence experts.

**A second linguistic issue related to excessive breadth concerns the fourth chapter of Leo XIII's encyclical.** This chapter contains references to a multitude of social problems, including the crisis of multilateralism, new forms of imperialism, war and asymmetric warfare, the arms race, economic imbalances, the logic of force, scientific research, dialogue and the culture of negotiation, violence and terrorism, cyber warfare, international organisations, migrants, refugees and minorities, care for creation, interfaith dialogue, schooling and education, and so on. These are specific, narrow-scope analyses that are overly reliant on empirical case studies. When undertaking such detailed reviews, it is difficult to adhere to magisterial and theological language without lapsing into vagueness, reductionism, and the obvious.

***Magnifica humanitas* is not limited to the issues we have highlighted,** although these are present. Hopefully, Leo XIV will free himself from the language created by others, as is already evident in some of his interventions, because putting the Church's affairs in order also depends on this.