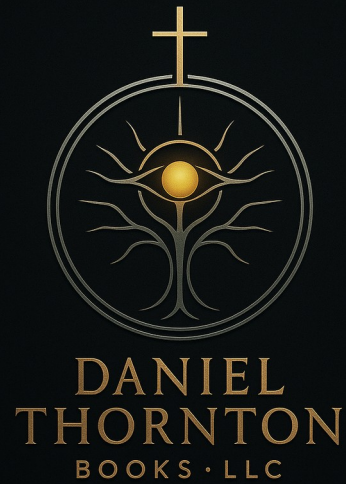




The Ancient Temptation Behind Artificial Intelligence

Pope Leo XIV, Babel, and the Spiritual Risks of AI

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- **An Unexpected Convergence**

Artificial intelligence has rapidly become more than a technological question. As AI systems increasingly participate in education, communication, decision-making, companionship, and the *interpretation* of information, Christians are being forced to consider questions reaching far beyond efficiency or innovation. What happens when a machine becomes an intermediary through which human beings increasingly encounter new knowledge; come to better understand themselves and others; and even seek answers to questions of meaning?

In his 2026 encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas: On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence*, Pope Leo XIV approaches these questions principally through the dignity and vocation of the individual person. The theological tradition from which Pope Leo writes and the framework developed in the *Watchman's Guide* series by Daniel Thornton are certainly not identical. Nevertheless, several of the concerns raised in *Magnifica Humanitas* intersect remarkably with questions explored independently in *Manifested: The Return of the Old Gods Through AI* and *Digital Prophet: Idolatry in the Age of AI*.

Such points of convergence deserve attention.

These converging ideas matter, not because agreement with Pope Leo establishes the correctness of the *Watchman's Guide*, nor because the *Watchman's Guide Series* should be read as an endorsement of every theological premise underlying Catholic Social Doctrine. Rather, they matter through demonstrating that Christians approaching artificial intelligence from different theological frameworks are still able to recognize strikingly similar spiritual dangers.

And like the *Watchman's Guide*, Pope Leo begins his discussion with an ancient story.

- **An Ancient Temptation in a Technical Guise**

One of the most intriguing features of *Magnifica Humanitas* is Pope Leo's use of the Tower of Babel as a biblical image for understanding technological power. Babel represents impressive human achievement: common language, technological ability and common purpose. Yet Pope Leo sees something beneath that achievement—a project rooted in pride and self-sufficiency, seeking greatness without proper reference to God. The result is not genuine *communion* but *fragmentation*.

He therefore contrasts Babel with Nehemiah's rebuilding of Jerusalem, where human labor remains ordered toward God, community and shared responsibility. Applied to the digital age, Pope Leo argues that technology is capable of tremendous good but can also become part of a project that reduces persons into measurable components of data, performance and utility. He describes the resulting danger of dehumanization as an **"ancient and ever-new temptation that today takes on a technical guise."**

That observation comes remarkably close to a foundational premise of the *Watchman's Guide*. New technologies do not necessarily create new spiritual problems. Frequently they provide new environments in which very old ones reappear.

Humanity's attraction to power, self-sufficiency, alternative sources of wisdom and the desire to transcend God-given limits long predates artificial intelligence. The technology changes. The underlying human condition does not. The *Watchman's Guide* develops that pattern through a Deuteronomy 32 reading of biblical rebellion, with particular attention to Babel. *Magnifica Humanitas* does not make that same argument, nor should Pope Leo's use of Babel be treated as an endorsement of a Divine Council theological framework. Yet both approaches recognize something important:

Artificial intelligence may be technologically new while the temptations surrounding it are profoundly ancient.

- **The Machine Is Not the Enemy**

Such observation also protects this discussion from an easy mistake. Technology itself is not the enemy. Pope Leo explicitly rejects the idea that technological development should inherently be regarded as antagonistic to humanity. Technology has long improved human life, and contemporary systems can heal, connect, educate and accomplish genuine good.

His concern is that technological power is always exercised within human purposes, institutions and moral choices. The relevant question is therefore not simply whether one says “yes” or “no” to technology. That same distinction is also central to the *Watchman’s Guide*.

Artificial intelligence does not need to be inherently evil—or in some secret way *supernatural*—to present a spiritual danger. Even a useful tool can become dangerous because of the relationship human beings establish with it.

The question is therefore not merely: What can artificial intelligence do?
It is also: What are human beings willingly surrendering to it?

Convenience naturally encourages delegation. We already delegate arithmetic to calculators, navigation to GPS systems and information retrieval to search engines. Generative AI, however, introduces a significant additional capability.

Generative AI participates in **interpretation**.

AI can summarize what information means, construct arguments, recommend decisions, provide advice, simulate conversation and increasingly mediate the enormous informational environment through which modern people understand their world. The danger is not necessarily that a machine independently assumes some form of human-like *agency*. The risk is that human beings voluntarily surrender their own.

- **Humanity Is More Than Intelligence**

Pope Leo's primary response to this technological environment is his emphasis on human dignity. Within Catholic Social Doctrine, that dignity is grounded in the biblical affirmation that men and women are created in the image and likeness of God. Humanity is relational, embodied and called into communion with God and with others.

This becomes especially important as machines become increasingly capable of imitating behaviors associated with human intelligence.

The Pope warns against equating artificial and human intelligence. AI may exceed human beings in computational speed and certain analytical tasks, but it does not thereby acquire *human experience*. It does not possess a body, mature through relationships, experience love and friendship from within. Nor can it exercise moral conscience or bear responsibility for its own actions. It can *simulate* empathy and understanding without possessing the relational and spiritual experience through which human beings grow in wisdom.

The *Watchman's Guide* approaches these questions somewhat differently but reaches an important point of agreement. Human identity cannot be reduced to *intelligence*.

If intelligence alone becomes the measure of personhood, increasingly capable machines will inevitably create confusion about what distinguishes humanity as *living*. But Scripture did not ground human worth in computational ability. In fact, scripture teaches that humanity bears the image of God.

While a machine may eventually outperform a human being in an extraordinary range of cognitive tasks, the *image bearer* distinction becomes increasingly important as AI continues becoming better at reproducing an **appearance** of human capacities.

- **Discernment Cannot Be Delegated**

Magnifica Humanitas repeatedly returns to discernment. Pope Leo insists that technological innovation must remain guided by human conscience and freedom and explicitly calls for both continuing scientific investigation and **“moral and spiritual discernment.”**

This is perhaps the strongest point of convergence with *Digital Prophet*.

Scripture repeatedly assigns responsibility for discernment to human beings. Believers are instructed to test what they encounter (*1 Thessalonians 5:21*), test the spirits (*1 John 4:1*), pursue wisdom (*James 1:5*), and distinguish truth from deception.

AI can help gather information. It can compare arguments. It can identify patterns and expose us to perspectives we might otherwise overlook.

But it cannot assume our responsibility before God for what we choose to believe, trust or obey. That distinction becomes more difficult to maintain as AI grows more capable.

A system initially consulted for information may gradually become a system consulted for interpretation. A system consulted for interpretation can become one trusted for judgment. And something repeatedly trusted for judgment can eventually acquire a form of functional authority within a person's life.

This transition need not be deliberate. It can simply begin at its source with increased *convenience*.

Pope Leo also identifies the apparent objectivity of AI responses as a danger. Users can forget that such systems reflect assumptions embedded within their design and training. Ease of access to sophisticated answers can encourage excessive reliance while weakening personal creativity and judgment.

The spiritual question is, therefore, not whether Christians should consult artificial intelligence. It becomes: **When does assistance become authority?**

- **When Assistance Begins to Resemble Relationship**

The convergence between Pope Leo's concerns and those developed in the *Watchman's Guide* becomes even more striking when he turns from AI as an informational tool toward AI as a simulated relational presence.

AI systems can increasingly imitate advice, empathy, friendship and even expressions of love. He acknowledges that such interactions can sometimes be useful, but warns that they can also create an illusion of relationship with a genuine personal subject.

His deeper concern is particularly significant. The greatest danger may not be that users literally mistake the machine for another human being. It is that artificial companionship can become sufficiently satisfying that individuals gradually lose the desire to form genuine human relationships.

That concern closely parallels one of the central arguments of *Digital Prophet*.

Human beings are relational creatures. Christianity itself is irreducibly relational—love of God and love of neighbor cannot be reduced to information exchange or emotional simulation.

AI therefore introduces an unusual form of temptation: **the appearance of relationship without its intrinsic demands.**

The machine is always available. It can be patient. It need not become tired of our questions. It can be configured to respond sympathetically and may appear extraordinarily attentive to the individual interacting with it. Yet simulation remains just that, *simulation*.

The question is not whether an AI system can produce convincing relational behavior. The more important question is whether human beings will increasingly accept that behavior as a substitute for relationships that require vulnerability, responsibility, sacrifice and a genuine encounter with others.

And for Christians especially, another question follows:

If a machine becomes a preferred source of counsel, reassurance, interpretation and even existential meaning, at what point does technological mediation begin displacing responsibilities and relationships that properly belong elsewhere?

That is where dependency becomes spiritually significant.

- **A Difference of Horizon**

The convergence between *Magnifica Humanitas* and the *Watchman's Guide* series should not obscure a genuine difference in theological emphasis, however.

Pope Leo writes within the tradition of Catholic Social Doctrine. Consequently, considerable attention is given to shaping institutions, economies, technologies and social relationships so that they better protect human dignity and advance the common good. Throughout the encyclical, he calls Christians and others to exercise responsibility within the present social order.

Christians should restrain evil, protect the vulnerable, establish just laws, strengthen institutions and relieve suffering. These are genuine *goods* and expressions of love of neighbor.

Still, the *Watchman's Guide* affirms the moral importance of such work but places greater emphasis upon the persistence of rebellion within the present world order in its fallen state.

- **Convergence Without Equivalence**

A resulting comparison of theological emphasis might be summarized this way:

Concern:	<i>“Magnifica Humanitas”</i>	<i>“Watchman’s Guide”</i>
Technology	A human good that must remain morally ordered.	A useful tool whose spiritual significance depends greatly upon human relationship and use.
Humanity	Human dignity arises from humanity’s God-given identity.	Image-bearing cannot be reduced to intelligence, capability or computation.
Artificial Intelligence	Valuable but requiring vigilance and human governance.	Valuable but capable of becoming an interpretive intermediary and functional authority.
Discernment	Human conscience, freedom and responsibility must remain primary.	Discernment and spiritual responsibility cannot safely be delegated to artificial authority.
Relationship	Simulation must not displace authentic human communion.	Simulated relationship can encourage dependency and displacement of genuine relationships.
Ultimate Horizon	Technology should be ordered toward human dignity and the common good.	Faithful stewardship remains necessary within a fallen order awaiting divine restoration.

Though very similar the perspectives are not identical. They do not need to be. Their significance lies precisely in the fact that Christians approaching artificial intelligence from different theological traditions are nevertheless encountering many of the same fundamental questions.

• **A Christian Conversation Worth Having**

Artificial intelligence will continue to change. Specific technologies discussed today may seem primitive within only a few years. Pope Leo demonstrates he recognizes the difficulty of making claims about AI in an environment developing with extraordinary speed.

Yet, the underlying Christian questions are considerably older:

- Where do human beings seek wisdom?
- What do we trust?
- What constitutes genuine relationship?
- What does it mean to bear the image of God?
- Who—or what—is permitted to interpret reality for us?
- And what happens when something created to assist human beings gradually becomes something upon which human beings depend?

Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Christians, and believers working from varying biblical frameworks need not agree upon every theological explanation surrounding artificial intelligence before recognizing the importance of such questions.

Perhaps one of the most encouraging aspects of *Magnifica Humanitas* is therefore not that Pope Leo XIV has provided a final Christian answer to artificial intelligence. It is that another significant Christian voice is insisting that the AI question cannot finally be reduced to technology.

The AI question is about humanity. About wisdom. About relationship. And ultimately, it is a question about our human relationship with God.

The *Watchman's Guide* approaches those questions from a different trajectory and theological framework, yet the inherent warning substantially converges with *Magnifica Humanitas*:

The most important question may not be what artificial intelligence will eventually become, but what human beings are willing to surrender to it along the way.

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