

Seeing through the glass, clearly: Labour, Intelligence, and Human Dignity -

A three-way reading of *Rerum Novarum*, *Antiqua et Nova*, and the *Builders AI Forum* message

Simon Uttley

SUCCESSIO APOSTOLICA · HOLY SEE · PONTIFICATUS ROMANI

From Leo to Leo

XIII · XIV

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A century and more between two Leonine pontificates

Pontifex · 258th Pope	XIII	SUCCESSION	Pontifex · 267th Pope	XIV
Pope Leo XIII Vincenzo Gioacchino Pecci		1878-1903	Pope Leo XIV Robert Francis Prevost, O.S.A.	
BORN 2 March 1810, Carpineto Romano, Italy			BORN 14 September 1955, Chicago, Illinois, USA	
ELECTED 20 February 1878			ELECTED 8 May 2025	
PONTIFICATE 1878 – 1903			PONTIFICATE 2025 – present	
DIED 20 July 1903, aged 93			FIRST WORDS "Peace be with you all" — from the central loggia, St. Peter's	
KNOWN FOR <i>Rerum Novarum</i> (1891); Catholic Social Teaching; longest-reigning pope of the modern era			NOTABLE First American-born pope; first Augustinian pontiff; former missionary in Peru	
ORDER Secular clergy (Diocese of Viterbo)			ORDER Order of Saint Augustine (O.S.A.)	
DURATION OF PONTIFICATE			DURATION OF PONTIFICATE	
25 years			Elected 2025	

◆

122	11
Years Between the Two Leos	Popes Between Them
From the death of Leo XIII (1903) to the election of Leo XIV (2025)	Pius X to Francis

The Intervening Pontiffs · 1903 – 2025

Pius X 257	Ben. XV 258	Pius XI 259	Pius XII 260	Jn. XXIII 261	Paul VI 262	JP I 263	JP II 264	Ben. XVI 265	Francis 266
1903-1914	1914-1922	1922-1939	1939-1958	1958-1963	1963-1978	1978	1978-2005	2005-2013	2013-2025

The name "Leo" — from the Latin *leo*, lion — had not been borne by a pope since 1903.

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Abstract

This article offers a sustained comparative analysis of three pontifical documents concerned with the relationship between technology, labour, human dignity, and the common good: Leo XIII's encyclical Rerum Novarum (1891), the joint Note of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education, Antiqua et Nova (2025), approved by Pope Francis, and Pope Leo XIV's Message to the Participants in the Builders AI Forum at the Collegium Maximum of Rome (3 November 2025). The article argues that these three texts constitute a coherent, developing tradition of Catholic social and anthropological reasoning — not merely in terms of shared rhetorical convention, but in terms of a stable set of philosophical and theological commitments that recur, adapt, and deepen across one hundred and thirty-four years. Those commitments centre on four interrelated claims: that the human person possesses irreducible dignity as imago Dei; that labour and creativity carry intrinsic worth beyond their economic function; that structural power must be ordered to the common good by means of subsidiarity and solidarity; and that technological development is morally significant precisely because it embodies a vision of the human person. The article examines the particular resonance of Rerum Novarum in both twenty-first-century documents, and closes with a theological reading of Leo XIV's distinctive contribution: his insistence that intelligence — artificial or human — finds its fullest meaning in love, freedom, and relationship with God.

Keywords: Rerum Novarum, Antiqua et Nova, Leo XIV, Catholic Social Teaching, artificial intelligence, human dignity, labour, common good, technocratic paradigm, imago Dei, personalism

Simon Uttley is Director of www.koin-ed.org, a serving secondary school headteacher, professor of education at the University of Notre Dame (USA), London and Visiting professor at St Mary's university, Twickenham, United Kingdom.

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1. Introduction: Three ruptures, one grammar

I remember the first time someone said the Church thinks in centuries, while most of us think in minutes, I wondered if this was a merely sentimental reference to the historic contours that constitute the pilgrim journey of the Catholic Church over time. In fact, it speaks not to nostalgia, but to epistemology – the way the Church engages with truth (and falsehood) is

directly informed by its inter-century positionality, with the richness that this brings, as well as the challenge to the *zeitgeist*. In short, the Church took the *long view* before the *long view* was a thing, and this itself is an important perspective. With this in mind, I never tire of teaching ‘Rerum Novarum’ to students. This document, written by the great Pope Leo XIII, is no stale piece of Victoriana, obsolete in our technically sophisticated late modernity. Indeed, I will argue that it provides a powerful *lens* to critically reflect on the very modern pronouncements on AI, amongst other things, which, like all new technologies, clamours for exceptionalism – that *it* represents such a paradigm shift that it is immune to any historical referencing. Inverting 1 Corinthians 13:12, to see through this ‘glass’, more clearly, as it were.

When Leo XIII issued Rerum Novarum in May 1891, he described the industrial order as producing a "momentous gravity of the state of things" — a phrase whose measured register barely conceals the depth of the crisis he was addressing (Leo XIII, 1891:1). Workers had been stripped of the protections afforded by the ancient guilds, exposed to what the encyclical calls "the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition," and reduced, in effect, to units of productive labour power (3). The encyclical's response was to insist on the priority of the human person over the economic system — not as a devotional afterthought, but as the structural foundation of the entire argument. The person, created in the image of a rational and creative God, cannot be reduced to a commodity. That conviction is the intellectual endowment Leo XIII bequeathed to all subsequent Catholic social thought.

More than a century later, the same conviction animates two documents that address an analogous, if epistemically more complex, crisis: the emergence of artificial intelligence as the dominant technology of the early twenty-first century. In January 2025, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education, under the authority of Pope Francis, published *Antiqua et Nova*: a Note on the relationship between artificial intelligence and human intelligence. In November of the same year, Pope Leo XIV addressed the Builders AI Forum at the Pontifical Gregorian University, explicitly citing *Antiqua et Nova* as the theological framework within which technological innovation must be understood, and closing with a vision of AI that "reflects the Creator's design: intelligent, relational and guided by love" (Leo XIV, 2025). These three texts — separated by 134 years at the outer and by less than twelve months at the inner interval — constitute a remarkable instance of doctrinal continuity in the face of rapid historical change.

This paper seeks to examine that continuity through close analysis and contextual interpretation. This is not to suggest that the three documents say the same thing — they do not — but that they share a common grammar: a stable set of anthropological, ethical, and theological commitments that structure their respective responses to the crises of their times. Section 2 contextualises each document in turn. Sections 3 to 6 trace the four major themes through which that common grammar operates: the dignity of the person as *Imago Dei*; the intrinsic value of labour and creative work; the common good and structural power; and the critique of the technocratic paradigm. Section 7 examines in detail the specific resonances of Rerum Novarum in both twenty-first-century texts. Section 8 addresses Leo XIV's distinctive theological contribution. Section 9 offers concluding reflections.

2. Three documents and their occasions

2.1 *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII, 1891)

Rerum Novarum was published on 15 May 1891 at a moment of acute social tension across Western industrial societies. The encyclical is addressed to the bishops of the Catholic world but explicitly concerns the welfare of the working class as a whole, regardless of religious affiliation. Its philosophical method is Thomistic natural law reasoning: arguments proceed from claims about human nature — rational, social, oriented to a transcendent end — to conclusions about rights and duties, including rights to property, just wages, religious observance, and free association. The tone is pastoral and practical, but the intellectual architecture is thoroughly scholastic.

The encyclical is structured around a double refusal: it rejects both the socialist abolition of private property and the liberal abandonment of workers to an unregulated market. Its alternative is neither a political programme nor an economic model but a moral framework: the recognition that neither capital nor labour is sovereign, that both are ordered to the good of persons, and that the Church's role is to articulate and sustain that ordering. Leo XIII insists that no purely legislative or economic solution will suffice without the formation of conscience through religious and moral education. The Church is not a political actor but the indispensable moral horizon within which just social arrangements become possible.

2.2 *Antiqua et Nova* (Pope Francis / DDF, 2025)

Antiqua et Nova was published on 28 January 2025 — the feast of Saint Thomas Aquinas, a choice of date that signals intellectual continuity — under the joint authority of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education, and approved by Pope Francis. The document takes its title from Matthew 13:52, where Jesus describes the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven as one who brings forth "what is new and what is old": the image frames the document's own relationship to the tradition from the outset.

The Note is structured in six major sections: introduction; a technical account of AI; a philosophical and theological analysis of human intelligence; an ethical framework for AI development and use; applied reflections across nine specific domains; and concluding reflections on wisdom. Its central conceptual move is the distinction between AI as a product of human intelligence and AI as an artificial form of it: "AI should not be seen as an artificial form of human intelligence but as a product of it" (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education [DDF], 2025: 35). This distinction grounds the document's ethical programme: if AI is a product of human creativity rather than an independent cognitive agent, then full moral responsibility for its design, deployment, and consequences rests with human persons.

2.3 Leo XIV's message to the Builders AI Forum (2025)

Pope Leo XIV's message was to the Builders AI Forum at the Pontifical Gregorian University — a gathering dedicated to "supporting the development of AI products that serve the Church's mission" (Leo XIV, 2025). The message is brief but concentrated: four paragraphs that move from greeting, through theological grounding, to ecclesial vision, and close with a Marian entrustment.

The message opens by reframing the Forum's question: the issue is "not merely what AI can do, but who we are becoming through the technologies we build" (Leo XIV, 2025). Leo XIV explicitly cites *Antiqua et Nova* §37 in support of his claim that technological innovation can be "a form of participation in the divine act of creation," and therefore carries an "ethical and spiritual weight" that obliges builders of AI to cultivate moral discernment as a fundamental part of their professional formation. He invokes *Fides et Ratio* (83) to frame the Forum's interdisciplinary work as a renewal of the dialogue between faith and reason, and closes by entrusting the participants' work to "Mary, Seat of Wisdom" — asking that collaboration "bear fruit in an AI that reflects the Creator's design: intelligent, relational and guided by love" (Leo XIV, 2025). The message appears to be the first papal document to cite *Antiqua et Nova* directly.

3. The anthropological foundation: Imago Dei and the primacy of the person

The most fundamental continuity across all three documents is anthropological. Each is organised around the conviction that the human person possesses irreducible dignity, grounded in having been created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). This is not merely a confessional assertion but a structural philosophical claim about what the human person is and therefore what the human person is owed. The three documents inhabit this claim differently, but none abandons it, and none allows it to be qualified by the logic of the dominant technology of its age.

In *Rerum Novarum*, the *imago Dei* grounds the argument for natural property rights through the doctrine of reason. Leo XIII writes that "it is the mind, or reason, which is the predominant element in us who are human creatures" and that precisely because the human person is rational, it must be "within his right to possess things not merely for temporary and momentary use, as other living things do, but to have and to hold them in stable and permanent possession" (Leo XIII, 1891: 6). The rational soul — which constitutes the divine image — is what makes possible the future-oriented, purposive agency that ownership expresses. To confiscate property without cause is not merely a legal wrong but an offence against the person's dignity as an image-bearer of God.

Antiqua et Nova develops the anthropological argument with considerably greater philosophical density, drawing on Aquinas's distinction between *ratio* (discursive reasoning) and *intellectus* (the intuitive, contemplative grasp of truth) to argue that human intelligence is irreducible to the statistical inference and pattern-matching that characterises AI systems:

"AI's advanced features give it sophisticated abilities to perform tasks, but not the ability to think" (DDF, 2025 : 12). The *imago Dei* is located not in a discrete cognitive faculty but in "the person as an inseparable unity of body and soul" (DDF, 2025, §9, citing *Dignitas Infinita* [2024], :18). The risk the document identifies is precisely the functionalist reduction of the person to what can be computed: "Drawing an overly close equivalence between human intelligence and AI risks succumbing to a functionalist perspective, where people are valued based on the work they can perform" (DDF, 2025, §34).

Leo XIV's message presupposes this anthropology and adds a further dimension: the dignity of the human person as co-creator. By citing *Antiqua et Nova* : 37 — which describes scientific and technological activity as "the collaboration of man and woman with God in perfecting the visible creation" — Leo XIV frames the act of building AI as itself an expression of *imago Dei* in its creative mode. The builder of AI is not merely a technician but, in some analogical sense, a sub-creator; every design choice is a moral choice because every design choice expresses a vision of what the human person is. This extends and deepens the analysis of Leo XIII: in 1891 the worker expressed the divine image in manual and craft labour; in 2025 the technologist expresses it in the creation of systems that will shape the conditions of life for millions.

4. The dignity of labour and the meaning of creative work

Labour — understood broadly as the purposive exercise of human capacities in the transformation of the world — occupies a central position in all three documents, though the register and emphasis shift significantly across 134 years. In *Rerum Novarum*, labour is primarily at risk from capitalist exploitation; in *Antiqua et Nova* and the Builders AI Forum message, it is at risk from technological displacement, deskilling, and the erosion of human agency. In both cases the argument is structured by the same anthropological premise: labour expresses the dignity of the person, and arrangements that deny or diminish that expression are unjust.

Leo XIII's treatment of labour rests on a double claim. First, that work is not merely a means of earning a livelihood but an expression of the human person's rational and creative nature: the worker puts "the impress of his personality" on the material world (Leo XIII, 1891, : 9), and in doing so makes that portion of the world his own — a form of personal expression through which the person's creative subjectivity takes material shape. Second, that industrial capitalism systematically violates this dignity: workers are treated as "bondsmen" rather than persons, their labour purchased at the lowest possible price and their spiritual and family lives neglected by employers whose only measure of value is profit. The just wage, the right to religious practice, the protection of family life, and the freedom to form associations are not concessions but entitlements grounded in the nature of the person.

Antiqua et Nova takes up this argument in the context of AI-driven labour markets. The Note observes (67) that current deployments of AI "can paradoxically deskill workers, subject them to automated surveillance, and relegate them to rigid and repetitive tasks. The

need to keep up with the pace of technology can erode workers' sense of agency and stifle the innovative abilities they are expected to bring to their work" (DDF, 2025 : 67). The word "paradoxically" is philosophically pointed: the very technology that was supposed to free workers from drudgery is, in many documented cases, producing precisely the kind of mechanical, monitored labour that *Rerum Novarum* denounced in the industrial factory. The document warns that if AI is used to replace rather than complement human workers, there is "a substantial risk of disproportionate benefit for the few at the price of the impoverishment of many" (DDF, 2025 : 68). The economic mechanism differs from 1891 — algorithmic displacement rather than industrial exploitation — but the structural logic is identical.

Leo XIV's message addresses the dignity of creative work from a different angle: not the worker threatened by exploitation or displacement, but the builder — the designer, researcher, and entrepreneur who creates AI systems. By insisting that "every design choice expresses a vision of humanity" and therefore carries ethical and spiritual weight, Leo XIV extends the concept of labour's dignity to the work of technological creation. The builder of AI is called to "cultivate moral discernment as a fundamental part of their work — to develop systems that reflect justice, solidarity, and a genuine reverence for life" (Leo XIV, 2025). This is a significant extension of the Leonine argument: it is not only the worker in the factory or the algorithm-managed warehouse whose dignity is at stake, but the technologist whose creative choices shape the conditions of life for millions of others.

5. The common good, structural power, and subsidiarity

The common good — the claim that the social order exists to serve the integral fulfilment of all persons — functions in all three documents as the normative criterion against which the actual effects of technology and capital are measured. Its repeated invocation across 134 years testifies to the Church's consistent identification of a structural temptation that takes new forms in each generation: the tendency of concentrated power to subordinate the common good to private advantage.

In *Rerum Novarum*, the common good argument operates against two forms of structural distortion: socialist collectivism, which dissolves the person into the collective, and laissez-faire capitalism, which dissolves the person into the market. Leo XIII's counterargument is that neither the state nor the market is sovereign: both are ordered to the good of persons. The principle of subsidiarity — given its classic formulation by Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) but anticipated in *Rerum Novarum* — is implicit in Leo XIII's insistence that the state should intervene in economic life only where private and associational resources have failed, and only to the extent necessary to restore the conditions of flourishing.

Antiqua et Nova applies the common good framework directly to the governance of AI. The document defines the common good in the language of *Gaudium et Spes* as "the sum total of social conditions that allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their

fulfilment more fully and more easily" (DDF, 2025 : 55). Against the technocratic tendency to treat efficiency as a self-justifying value, the Note insists that "human dignity and the common good must never be violated for the sake of efficiency" (DDF, 2025 : 54). It identifies two specific structural threats analogous to those Leo XIII identified: the concentration of AI development in the hands of "a few powerful companies" (DDF, 2025 : 53), and the risk of AI being used to "perpetuate marginalisation and discrimination, create new forms of poverty, widen the digital divide, and worsen existing social inequalities" (DDF, 2025 : 52). The subsidiarity principle is invoked explicitly: "The responsibility for managing this wisely pertains to every level of society, guided by the principle of subsidiarity and other principles of Catholic Social Teaching" (DDF, 2025: 42).

Leo XIV's message reinforces this framework by insisting that AI development must be "a profoundly ecclesial endeavour" oriented toward "the integral development of every person" (Leo XIV, 2025). The phrase "integral development of every person" — drawn from Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and developed through the subsequent CST tradition — signals that the common good concern encompasses the full range of human capacities: cognitive, relational, spiritual, and moral. The solidarity dimension — the preferential concern for the most vulnerable — runs through all three documents with equal force, from Leo XIII's attention to the "indigent and destitute" to *Antiqua et Nova's* concern for those excluded from the benefits of the digital economy to Leo XIV's vision of technology serving "the whole human family" (Leo XIV, 2025).

6. Against the technocratic paradigm: A shared critical disposition

All three documents share a principled critical disposition toward what *Antiqua et Nova*, following Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* (2015), calls the "technocratic paradigm": the assumption that the trajectory of technological development is inherently progressive, that technical problems have technical solutions, and that the expansion of human capability through technology is straightforwardly good. None of the three texts refuses technology as such; all three insist that technology's moral value depends on the ends it serves and the vision of the human person it embodies.

Rerum Novarum does not use this vocabulary, but the argument is fully present in substance. Leo XIII refuses to accept that the industrial order, left to develop according to its own internal logic, will produce justice. The logic of capital accumulation, uncorrected by moral formation, religious practice, and appropriate legal structures, tends naturally towards exploitation. More precisely, Leo XIII identifies a specific form of determinism that must be resisted: the conflation of natural inequality — which reflects genuine human diversity — with structural injustice, which reflects the abuse of power. Against this, he insists that only moral formation can maintain that distinction in practice.

Antiqua et Nova defines the technocratic paradigm as the assumption that "reality, goodness, and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such" (DDF, 2025 : 54, citing *Laudato Si'*). The document's critique has a specifically epistemological

dimension: because AI systems generate outputs that mimic the products of human intelligence, they risk producing what the Note calls "digital reductionism" — a tendency to treat the quantifiable and computable aspects of human life as exhaustive, relegating "non-quantifiable aspects of life" to irrelevance because they cannot be processed in formal terms (DDF, 2025: 112). The risk is not only economic displacement but the erosion of the conceptual vocabulary — wisdom, conscience, love, beauty — through which the full range of human experience can be understood and valued.

Leo XIV's message addresses this risk from the perspective of the builder. By asking "who we are becoming through the technologies we build" (Leo XIV, 2025), Leo XIV raises the question of technological formation: the way in which sustained engagement with AI systems shapes the cognitive habits, moral sensibilities, and relational patterns of those who design them. The antidote to the technocratic paradigm is therefore not primarily regulatory but formative. The common thread across all three documents is the insistence that the solution to the problem of technology is not more technology but a deeper engagement with the human: a formation of the whole person that no algorithm can supply. *Rerum Novarum* insists on moral and religious formation; *Antiqua et Nova* insists on "wisdom of the heart" that "cannot be sought from machines" (DDF, 2025 : 114); Leo XIV entrusts the Forum's work to Mary, Seat of Wisdom, invoking a figure whose significance lies precisely in the integration of intelligence with love, humility, and receptivity to God.

7. The resonance of *Rerum Novarum* in the contemporary documents

The resonance of *Rerum Novarum* in *Antiqua et Nova* and the Builders AI Forum message is not accidental, not merely rhetorical, and not simply a function of shared institutional affiliation. It is the resonance of a particular mode of moral reasoning — natural law thinking grounded in a thick, integral anthropology — encountering new problems that its foundational commitments equip it to address. Five structural parallels warrant detailed attention.

First, the double refusal. Just as *Rerum Novarum* refuses both socialist collectivism and laissez-faire capitalism, *Antiqua et Nova* refuses both a technophobic rejection of AI and an uncritical embrace of it. The document acknowledges the genuine benefits of AI in medicine, education, environmental modelling, and the promotion of human fraternity, whilst insisting equally on the genuine risks of AI in perpetuating inequality, displacing labour, enabling manipulation, and reducing the human person to a data set. Leo XIV reproduces this dialectical structure: the Forum is praised for seeking to ensure that "emerging technologies remain oriented toward the dignity of the human person and the common good" (Leo XIV, 2025) — a formulation that presupposes both the genuine potential and the genuine danger of AI.

Second, the priority of moral formation over legislative mechanism. Leo XIII is explicit that no "practical solution" to the social question "will be found apart from the intervention of religion and of the Church" (Leo XIII, 1891 : 16) — not because he wishes to subordinate

the state to ecclesiastical authority, but because legislation operates on behaviour whilst religion operates on conviction, and just behaviour without just conviction is always vulnerable to circumvention. *Antiqua et Nova* makes the same argument for AI governance: whilst regulatory frameworks matter, the foundational requirement is the formation of moral agents who exercise prudence and conscience. Leo XIV distils this into the obligation that AI builders "cultivate moral discernment as a fundamental part of their work" (Leo XIV, 2025).

Third, the concern for structural concentration. Leo XIII's identification of the concentration of capital "in the hands of comparatively few" (Leo XIII, 1891 : 3) as the root cause of the social crisis is directly echoed in *Antiqua et Nova*'s concern about the concentration of AI power in the hands of "a few powerful companies" whose interests may diverge from the common good (DDF, 2025 : 53). In both cases the argument is not that private enterprise is inherently wrong, but that unregulated concentration produces structural injustice regardless of the good intentions of individual actors.

Fourth, the intrinsic value of work. Leo XIII's claim that in working the person puts "the impress of his personality" on the material world (Leo XIII, 1891 : 9) anticipates *Antiqua et Nova*'s development of work as "a means of personal growth, the building of healthy relationships, self-expression and the exchange of gifts" (DDF, 2025 : 69), and Leo XIV's insistence that the creative act of building AI carries "ethical and spiritual weight" because "every design choice expresses a vision of humanity" (Leo XIV, 2025). All three texts refuse the purely instrumentalist account of labour: work is not what the person does to earn the means to live; it is one of the primary modes through which the person's dignity as *imago Dei* is expressed in the world.

Fifth, the eschatological horizon. Leo XIII situates the analysis of economic life within an explicitly eschatological framework: "The things of earth cannot be understood or valued aright without taking into consideration the life to come" (Leo XIII, 1891 : 21). *Antiqua et Nova* invokes the same horizon in its treatment of AI and the relationship with God: the presumption that AI can substitute for God is a failure to understand that the person's deepest longings "can only be truly satisfied in communion with God" (DDF, 2025: 104). Leo XIV closes with an act of Marian entrustment that presupposes the same horizon and deepens it: the work of the Forum is commended not to human ingenuity alone but to the wisdom of the one who pondered the Word made flesh and kept all these things in her heart (cf. Lk. 2:19).

8. Leo XIV's distinctive contribution: Intelligence as love

Leo XIV's Builders AI Forum message is brief, but its brevity should not obscure its conceptual ambition. In four paragraphs it enacts a movement from the ethical (AI as carrying "ethical and spiritual weight") through the ecclesial (AI development as a "profoundly ecclesial endeavour") to the theological (intelligence, "whether artificial or human," as finding "its fullest meaning in love, freedom and relationship with God"). This final clause constitutes a genuine doctrinal development within the tradition examined in this article.

Antiqua et Nova had already insisted that human intelligence cannot be understood apart from its contemplative, moral, and relational dimensions, and that "wisdom of the heart" is the integrating faculty needed to navigate the challenges of AI. But the document's primary register remains anthropological and ethical: it is concerned with what human intelligence is and how it differs from AI, and with the principles that should govern AI's development and use.

Leo XIV's message adds a dimension that is more properly theological: intelligence is not merely a human capacity to be protected and respected but a participation in the divine intelligence, and it finds its fullest meaning not in any human achievement — cognitive, technical, or moral — but in love, freedom, and relationship with God. This is, implicitly, a Johannine theology of intelligence: the Logos through whom all things were made (Jn. 1:3) is not only the ground of created rationality but its telos. Intelligence, fully understood, is not the capacity to process information or even to reason correctly; it is the capacity to know and be known in the mode of love.

The practical implication for AI development is stated with precision: "intelligence — whether artificial or human — finds its fullest meaning in love, freedom and relationship with God" (Leo XIV, 2025). The "whether artificial or human" is not a claim that AI can love or freely relate to God — that would contradict the foundational argument of *Antiqua et Nova* — but a claim about the telos of the human intelligence that creates and deploys AI. The builder of AI is a person whose intelligence finds its meaning in love and freedom and divine relationship; therefore, the AI that such a person builds should reflect — insofar as a tool can reflect the purposes of its maker — the values of justice, solidarity, and reverence for life that are the social expressions of that love.

This move has a precise structural parallel in *Rerum Novarum*. Leo XIII does not merely defend private property as a natural right; he insists that the right use of property requires its subordination to charity. The owner is, in Aquinas's phrase cited by Leo XIII, a steward of God's providence: property rightly held must be held as "common to all, so as to share them without hesitation when others are in need" (Leo XIII, 1891 : 22, citing Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 66, a. 2). The natural right to property is real, but it is embedded within a larger theological account of human life as gift, responsibility, and love of neighbour. Leo XIV makes the same move at the level of intelligence: the creative capacity to build AI is a genuine human endowment, but it is embedded within a larger theological account of human life as participation in the intelligence of a God who creates, sustains, and redeems the world in love.

9. Conclusion

This article has argued that *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Antiqua et Nova* (2025), and Leo XIV's Builders AI Forum message (2025) constitute a coherent and developing tradition of Catholic social and anthropological thought. The three texts differ in form, occasion, scope, and emphasis. But they share a common grammar — a stable set of commitments about the

dignity of the person, the meaning of work, the demands of the common good, and the limits of technological determinism — that structures their respective responses to the crises of their times.

The resonance of *Rerum Novarum* in both twenty-first-century documents is audible at multiple levels: in their shared double refusal; in their common insistence on moral formation over legislative mechanism; in their parallel concern about structural concentration; in their defence of the intrinsic value of human labour against reduction to economic utility; and in their shared eschatological horizon. Leo XIII did not anticipate artificial intelligence, but he articulated, with remarkable precision, the anthropological and ethical framework within which any subsequent confrontation with technological power would have to be conducted.

Antiqua et Nova demonstrates what it means to bring that framework to bear on a genuinely new set of problems. It is not merely an application of received principles to new cases; it develops the principles themselves, deepening the account of human intelligence, extending the concern for the common good to the global digital economy, and giving explicit philosophical attention to the limits of functionalism as an account of the human person. In doing so, it performs the task the tradition has always set itself: bringing forth, in Matthew's image, "what is new and what is old."

Leo XIV's message represents a further development of a different kind: not primarily philosophical but theological. By locating the fullest meaning of intelligence in love, freedom, and relationship with God, Leo XIV moves the conversation from anthropology to Christology, from the ethics of AI to the theology of creation and redemption. The image with which he closes — an AI that "reflects the Creator's design: intelligent, relational and guided by love" — is not a technical specification but a theological vision. It names what is at stake in the development of AI with a precision that no purely ethical or regulatory framework can achieve. The question is not only what AI systems do but what kind of persons build them, and whether those persons understand their creative work as a participation in the intelligence of a God who creates and redeems in love.

Across 134 years and three pontificates, the tradition has remained faithful to its deepest conviction: the human person, made for love, is the measure of all things, and every technology is to be judged by whether it serves or betrays that vocation.

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