# Catholic Higher Education Meets A.I.

## We can't let new technology override moral wisdom

By Robert A. Dowd



In "Magnifica Humanitas," Pope Leo XIV invites us to see that in a world with artificial intelligence, we need not only technical expertise but also moral wisdom. The pope does not condemn A.I. Instead, he promotes an appreciation of A.I. as a tool that, like any tool, can be used for good or for ill. We can use this tool in ways that help us to think more creatively and critically, or less so; to solve problems, or make them worse; to unite us, or divide us; to enhance life, or destroy it.

Pope Leo urges us to ensure that moral wisdom guides humankind's decision-making about A.I., and he calls us to accept our shared responsibility in this regard: "Fidelity to the truth requires integrating the possibilities offered by technology within a framework marked by wisdom, which is capable of safeguarding both the dignity of each person and the future of our common home" (No. 220).

In a world with A.I., the humanities, which have always been at the core of Catholic higher education, have never been more important. All academic disciplines, from finance to biology to chemical engineering, develop important capacities for analysis and understanding, and they play critical roles in advancing human knowledge. At the same time, it is essential to study the humanities—philosophy, theology, literature, history and the arts—for the rich wisdom they offer on the most fundamental questions: what it means to be human, why there is suffering in the world and how to pursue truth.

In the words of St. John Henry Newman, "It will not satisfy me...to have two independent systems, intellectual and religious, going at once side by side, by a sort of division of labour, and only accidentally brought together.... I want the same roof to contain both the intellectual and moral discipline." (These words are from the sermon "Intellect, the Instrument of Religious Training," delivered at the University Church in Dublin in 1856.)

There are now financial and political pressures to cut funding for the humanities, but those of us who lead Catholic colleges and universities must redouble our efforts to encourage students, regardless of academic major, to grow in their understanding of what it means to be truly human. We must encourage them to cultivate curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, moral courage and compassion through their study of the humanities. These qualities cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence, and they are precisely the competencies our future leaders will need in order to navigate a world that grows ever more complex.

Whereas A.I. is very good at quickly processing information and offering recommendations, it lacks the discernment, intuition and interpersonal knowledge that are often crucial to making good decisions amid complexity. A.I. is not capable of weighing competing values and moral trade-offs—skills so often necessary when making difficult choices, whether about the future of a business or the policies that impact the social, economic and political well-being of a country. Perhaps most important, A.I. is not capable of recognizing injustice and exerting the moral courage needed to address it.

Interdisciplinary research will become increasingly important as our use of A.I. grows, and Catholic higher education, whose very purpose is to integrate faith and reason, has long understood the necessity of engineers and scientists working with philosophers and economists. Through our research and scholarship, we must envision how A.I. can help us to address the most urgent problems facing our world. We must also remain vigilant and speak plainly about the negative consequences of A.I., especially those that diminish respect for human dignity and impact the most vulnerable.

Catholic colleges and universities have never been ivory towers, and the need for our engagement has never been more evident or more urgent. We must be in dialogue not only with our fellow scholars and researchers but also with industry, government and communities both near and far. We must do all that we can to shape the development of new technologies in accord with moral wisdom, as Pope Leo has called us to do. "Magnifica Humanitas" is a great gift to the church and the wider world, and it serves to remind those of us who serve at Catholic colleges and universities of our special responsibility. Let us take up the challenge and opportunity of our times with faith, courage and hope.

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