

BROOKINGS

COMMENTARY

Pope Leo's moral stance on AI could encourage greater oversight

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- Pope Leo XIV chose his name in part to honor Pope Leo XIII, who led the Vatican as the world shifted to an industrial economy, and who championed workers' rights.
- The pope has implied we are in a similar era of change given the rise of AI and has warned the technology could fuel "polarization, conflict, fear and violence."
- Whether or not Leo's words are heeded by governments and businesses, people around the world give attention to church teachings, and his views could broaden their perspectives about AI.

When Robert Francis Prevost was elected a pope in 2025, he took the name Pope Leo XIV in part to honor Pope Leo XIII, a who led the Vatican from 1878 to 1903 and showed tremendous moral leadership and social conscience as the world shifted from an agrarian to an industrial economy a. At a time when social perspectives were not very popular, he called for fair wages, workers' rights, labor unions, and safe working conditions at a time of rapid economic and political transformation.

In choosing his new name, Pope Leo XIV provided an important signal regarding how he felt about the state of the world, which has been further clarified by his critical stance on the Iran war a and defense of the "just war" theory a. He has also voiced concern about a growing acceptance a of war and violence, the neglect of peace and dialogue, and the cavalier manner in which contemporary political leaders deploy *military force*.

But his words on artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies are equally noteworthy, especially as he builds on Pope Francis' critical AI stance. In a December 2024 press release —then under Francis' leadership—the Vatican announced an AI policy that was far-reaching and visionary in its stance on digital technologies. It stated that “the key principle is that technological innovation cannot and should never overtake or replace human beings. On the contrary, it should serve humanity, and support and respect human dignity.”

In adopting this position, the Vatican has supported a prohibition on AI practices that “cause discrimination; harm individuals physically or psychologically through subliminal manipulation; exclude people with disabilities; create social inequalities; demean human dignity; [or] violate fundamental human rights.” It also indicated it is labeling any use of AI in the creation or reproduction of “texts, music, photos, [or] audiovisual and radio content” and discouraging priests from using AI to write their homilies. And out of concern for personal privacy, the Vatican implemented guidelines for the protection of personal data and the safe processing of individual material.

Since then, Leo has taken a critical stance on AI risks. During his recent trip to Africa, for example, he warned that AI could fuel “polarization, conflict, fear and violence.” He spoke out against tyrants who promote corruption and push inhumane policies. Overall, he has taken the view that maintaining humanity in the face of the digital revolution is of the utmost importance, and we should be careful to ensure justice and fairness in algorithmic operations.

These views indicate he is following the model of Leo XIII who was known for his forceful support of workers' rights amid industrialization. Leo XIV has positioned us in a similar era, expressing that something big is taking place, and religious leaders cannot remain silent regarding megachange, such as digital technologies that affect individuals, economies, societies, and political systems.

Speaking more broadly, the pope is putting his moral authority behind AI oversight. He has warned business and government leaders that he is paying attention to nefarious practices and will speak out against those he feels are violating important moral doctrines. This is aligned with his general position on war and violence and the need for dialogue to avoid inhumane outcomes.

At a December 2025 conference on “Artificial Intelligence and Care for Our Common Home,” Leo called for collaboration on technological development and maintenance of the view that “human beings are called to be co-workers in the work of creation, not merely passive consumers of content generated by artificial technology.” Developers must maintain their focus on the common good and make sure AI “is not just used to accumulate wealth and power in the hands of a few,” he said.

It is unclear how impactful his AI comments will be on government and business operations, but with 1.4 billion Catholics around the world and others who pay attention to church teachings, the pope has a platform unlike any other leader. Employing a moral viewpoint, he is broadening people’s perspectives about technologies and pushing his contemporaries to take care in their actions. Decades from now, historians very well could point to his moral leadership as one of the important factors that moved society toward stronger digital oversight. He could become the same pioneering figure on digitization that his religious namesake became more than a century ago on industrialization.

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