

Stars and Souls: Tech Oligarchs' Intergalactic Dreams versus a Vatican Bereft of Moral Authority

In the summer of 2026, the contrast between humanity's two most ambitious claimants to the future could hardly be starker. On one side stand the tech billionaires; visionaries of Silicon Valley, Seattle, and Austin who speak openly of conquering intergalactic horizons, seeding Mars with self-sustaining cities, uploading consciousness into silicon, and achieving a technological singularity that promises unlimited power and intelligence. On the other stands the Vatican, which in May released *Magnifica Humanitas*, its first encyclical devoted entirely to artificial intelligence. The document is thoughtful, even elegant in its insistence that AI must serve human dignity rather than supplant it. Yet it lands like a whisper against the roar of rocket engines and neural interfaces. For the Church's moral authority once the West's most enduring counterweight to raw power, has been hollowed out by decades of scandal, diplomatic compromise, and institutional self-preservation. The result is an impotent antidote to the titans' dreams, offered by an institution that can no longer command the respect required to restrain them.

The tech world's horizon is no longer earthly. Elon Musk's Starship program is not merely about tourism or science; it is framed as the first step toward making humanity multi-planetary, then multi-stellar, ultimately intergalactic. In public statements and internal X posts, Musk has described Earth as a "cradle" we must outgrow, lest a single asteroid or climate catastrophe snuff out our species. Jeff Bezos envisions O'Neill cylinders, vast orbital habitats, as the next chapter of civilization, where the polluting industries of Earth can be exiled to space while the planet itself becomes a nature preserve for the ultra-wealthy. Sam Altman and the OpenAI cohort speak of AGI and superintelligence not as tools but as successors: entities that will surpass human cognition, solve fusion, cure aging, and perhaps render biological humanity obsolete or at best ornamental. The implicit promise is transcendence for the elect. The rest of humanity, billions of baseline humans, may be left behind, either as quaint relics in a managed preserve or as raw material for the new order.

Critics have called this vision "billionaire eschatology," a secular rapture in which the saved are those who can afford the ticket to Mars or the neural lace. Ethics are secondary. Power, money, and control are primary. When regulators question monopoly, safety, or labor practices, the response is often a mixture of libertarian defiance and messianic inevitability: "If we don't do it, China will." Human dignity becomes a legacy feature, not a design constraint.

Into this vacuum the Vatican has spoken. *Magnifica Humanitas*, promulgated by Pope Leo XIV on 15 May 2026, is a serious attempt to apply two millennia of Catholic social teaching to the age of algorithms. The encyclical warns against the concentration of technological power in private hands, the reduction of the human person to data points, and the temptation to treat intelligence, artificial or otherwise, as an end in itself rather than a servant of the common good. It calls for "disarming" AI of the logics of competition and domination, insisting that machines must enhance, not replace,

the relational, embodied, and transcendent dimensions of human life. Drawing on *Rerum Novarum* and *Laudato Si'*, it argues that unchecked technocracy reproduces the very inequalities and spiritual voids that earlier popes condemned in industrial capitalism. The document is measured, erudite, and pastorally sensitive. It even acknowledges the genuine goods AI might bring—medical diagnostics, climate modeling, accessibility for the disabled—while refusing to baptize the entire project with uncritical enthusiasm.

Yet for all its intellectual rigor, *Magnifica Humanitas* feels like a paper decree issued from a burning city. Its moral force is blunted by the very institution that issued it. The Catholic Church's authority to speak on the dignity of the human person has been gravely compromised by its own failures, beginning with the clerical sexual-abuse crisis that exploded into global view in the early 2000s and has never truly been extinguished.

The case of Theodore McCarrick remains the emblem of institutional rot. A serial predator of seminarians and minors, McCarrick was nevertheless protected, promoted, and deployed as a diplomatic asset for decades. Under Pope Francis, the disgraced cardinal already known within clerical circles as “Uncle Ted” for his grooming patterns, was allowed to conduct shuttle diplomacy with Beijing. That back-channel work helped produce the 2018 Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the Chinese Communist Party, an accord that effectively grants the atheist regime a decisive voice in the appointment of Catholic bishops. In exchange for a fragile “unity,” the Vatican has ceded to an authoritarian government the right to select shepherds of the Church. The deal has been renewed multiple times; underground Catholics who refuse to join the state-sanctioned Patriotic Association have been left isolated. The moral optics could scarcely be worse: a Church that once defied emperors now negotiates with a regime that runs re-education camps and demolishes crosses.

The stain does not end with China. Pope Francis himself elevated to the College of Cardinals three American bishops widely regarded as protégés of McCarrick; Blase Cupich of Chicago, Joseph Tobin of Newark, and Robert McElroy, now of Washington. These elevations occurred even as the McCarrick scandal consumed headlines and as Vatican investigators compiled reports on the former cardinal's decades of predation. The message sent to the global Church was unmistakable: loyalty to the Francis project mattered more than the odor of scandal. Meanwhile, the same pontificate moved with notable severity against conservative and traditionalist Catholics. In France, where vibrant communities attached to the Traditional Latin Mass had grown steadily, the implementation of *Traditionis Custodes* (2021) and subsequent directives led to the suppression of liturgies, the investigation of entire dioceses (notably Fréjus-Toulon), and the marginalization of lay associations that dared question the post-conciliar trajectory. Traditional Catholics who sought the ancient rite were painted as rigid or divisive, even as the Vatican extended olive branches to Beijing.

The double standard was lost on no one: the regime that persecutes Uyghurs receives diplomatic deference; the faithful who simply want the Mass of their grandparents receive inquisitorial scrutiny.

These wounds are not ancient history. They define the present moral credibility of the institution that now presumes to counsel the tech titans. Pope Leo XIV, elected after Francis's death, wears all the right vestments; the white cassock, the red mozzetta on solemn occasions, the fisherman's ring, and speaks in the soothing, pastoral tones that have become the post-Francis house style. His encyclical is careful not to indict his predecessor by name. Instead, it normalizes the moral ambiguities of the Francis era by treating them as settled administrative choices rather than open wounds. The China deal remains in force. The McCarrick network's influence lingers in appointments and curial culture. The crackdown on traditionalists continues, albeit with gentler rhetoric. The result is a papacy that projects continuity and serenity while the underlying loss of trust festers. Catholics in pews—especially in the Global South and in traditionalist strongholds—note the contrast: a Church swift to condemn “ideological colonization” by Western progressives is far more hesitant when the colonizer is the Chinese Communist Party or when the scandal involves its own princes.

The tech world, by contrast, operates with almost no internal ethical brake. Its driving forces are power, money, and control. The same companies racing toward AGI are the ones that have mastered surveillance capitalism, algorithmic manipulation of public discourse, and the privatization of public infrastructure. When ethicists or governments raise alarms about superintelligence alignment, job displacement, or existential risk, the reply is often a blend of Panglossian optimism (“AI will solve poverty”) and veiled threats (“regulation will hand victory to our geopolitical rivals”). Human ethics, when they appear at all, are frequently reduced to public-relations exercises or “effective altruism” frameworks that conveniently align with shareholder value. The billionaires do not hide their post-human ambitions; they celebrate them in TED talks, podcasts, and X threads. Leaving “legacy” humanity behind is not a bug—it is the feature. Mars colonies for the cognitive elite; neural implants for those who can pay; digital afterlives for the uploaded. The rest may be managed, pacified, or simply rendered irrelevant.

Magnifica Humanitas sees this danger. It pleads for an anthropology that refuses to reduce persons to code or potential compute. It calls governments and corporations to accountability. Yet without moral authority, such pleas become performative. The Church that once excommunicated emperors and inspired abolitionists now struggles to police its own bishops, much less restrain trillion-dollar corporations whose founders openly dream of godhood. The abuse crisis taught the world that the Vatican could cover for predators; the China deal taught it that the Vatican could compromise with totalitarians; the elevation of McCarrick's protégés and the simultaneous punishment of French traditionalists taught it that the Vatican could play favorites with breathtaking cynicism. When a Pope in pristine vestments issues a thoughtful encyclical in soothing tones, the world, especially the tech world, simply shrugs. The document is filed alongside other nice statements from once-great institutions. It does not change the trajectory of the rocket ships or the training clusters.

The deeper tragedy is what this impotence forecloses. A Church with intact moral credibility could have offered the tech age something it desperately lacks: a transcendent vision of the human person that is neither libertarian individualism nor collectivist utility. It could have insisted that intelligence, whether carbon-based or silicon, finds its purpose in love, sacrifice, and relationship with the Creator. Instead, the Vatican's voice is muffled by its own sins. The tech titans proceed, unhindered by anything resembling a serious external conscience. Intergalactic horizons beckon the few; the many are left to wonder whether the future has any room left for their souls.