

Between Babel and Power Politics: A Christian Democratic Reading of Magnifica Humanitas

Federico Ottavio Reho

Introduction

The publication of Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, marks an important moment not only for Catholic social doctrine, but also more broadly for a reflection on the foundations of political, social and international order.¹ While the document is formally centred on the challenges posed by artificial intelligence, it in fact contains a much wider diagnosis of the current condition of humanity and of global coexistence—including a sharp analysis of the current crisis of international order.

Historically, major social encyclicals have not only clarified doctrinal principles, but have also shaped intellectual, political and social agendas well beyond ecclesial circles. One might think of *Rerum Novarum* and its long-lasting influence on Catholic approaches to socio-economic questions, or of *Quadragesimo Anno* and its central role in developing the principle of subsidiarity. It would therefore not be surprising if *Magnifica Humanitas* were to play a similar role in the coming years, especially with regard to questions of governance, technology and international order.

For Christian Democrats, conservatives and, more broadly, for all those political traditions open to the contribution of religious thought to public life, this document deserves careful and sustained reflection. Although the problem of international order is not presented as the central thematic focus of the encyclical, it is in fact one of its underlying concerns. The present contribution aims to explore precisely what kind of reflections *Magnifica Humanitas* may inspire on this topic.

¹ Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, The Holy See (2026), accessed at <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/encyclicals/documents/20260515-magnifica-humanitas.html> on 22 June 2026.

***Magnifica Humanitas* and the crisis of international order**

One of the most striking features of *Magnifica Humanitas* is its use of powerful symbolic language to describe the alternatives facing humanity today. In particular, the encyclical frames the current historical moment through the contrast between two archetypal temptations, both of which bear directly on the question of international order.

The first is what might be described as the ‘Tower of Babel’ temptation, expressed in contemporary terms by what Pope Leo calls the ‘globalised technocratic paradigm’. This paradigm is not limited to a narrow understanding of the domain of technology, but encompasses the broader civilisational posture that marked the decades following the end of the Cold War. It reflects the belief that a single model—typically identified with Western liberal democracy and market capitalism—could be universalised and progressively imposed across the globe, irrespective of cultural, historical and civilisational differences.

In geopolitical terms, this translated into a form of liberal hegemony that, especially in its more assertive and unilateral forms, sought to reshape the international system in its own image. In retrospect, such a project revealed clear elements of hubris, neglecting both the limits of political action and the legitimacy of alternative perspectives, particularly those emerging from the Global South. The encyclical’s reference to Babel is therefore highly evocative: a project of apparent unity, efficiency and universality, ultimately grounded in pride and leading paradoxically towards fragmentation rather than cohesion.

The second temptation identified by the encyclical is, in many ways, the mirror image of the first. It takes the form of a fragmented and conflictual international system, characterised by what Pope Leo describes as a confrontation ‘between those that seek to preserve their supremacy and those that aspire to seize it’, resulting in a multiplication of local conflicts and a generalised return of power politics. In this context, a form of cynical realpolitik tends to prevail, in which considerations of force and strategic advantage crowd out any ethical reflection and long-term responsibility.

Between these two poles—the hubris of technocratic universalism and the fragmentation of competing imperialisms—*Magnifica Humanitas* calls for a different path in international politics.

The first element of this alternative is the call for a ‘civilisation of love’, understood not as a utopian abstraction but as the necessary ethical horizon of any durable political and international order. Relations between states, peoples and cultures cannot be reduced either to domination or to mechanical coordination. They require recognition, reciprocity, responsibility and a minimum degree of mutual goodwill.

The second element is the invitation to adopt what the Pope terms a ‘healthy realism’. This represents, if not a doctrinal innovation, at least a distinctive emphasis of the present pontificate. Such realism acknowledges the permanence of conflict, the limits of human nature and the constraints of political action, but refuses to sever the link between power and morality. It seeks a form of political judgement capable of navigating between naive idealism and cynical pragmatism.

Taken together, these elements suggest that *Magnifica Humanitas* is not only a social encyclical on technology, but also a reflection on the conditions of a just and stable international order. They open the space for a renewed engagement, particularly on the part of Christian Democratic and conservative traditions, with the fundamental question of how power, legitimacy and ethical foundations can be reconciled in an age marked by pluralism, conflict and rapid transformation.

Europe’s lesson: power, legitimacy and the missing ethical foundation

Europe occupies a particular position when reflecting on the crisis of international order, not because it possesses any moral primacy, but because it has historically experienced (and indeed provoked), in a particularly intense way, both the construction and the collapse of such order.

Over the past two and a half centuries, international order has broken down twice in a fundamental way: during the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars from 1792 to 1815, and during what has been called the ‘European civil war’ of 1914–45. There were many, often very violent, conflicts before and after, but they generally unfolded within an accepted framework of order. In these two cases, the framework collapsed.

From the first of these breakdowns, the architects of the Congress of Vienna drew an essential lesson: that a functioning international order requires both a balance of power and an agreed (or at least negotiable) concept of legitimacy, enshrined in what was then called European public law. The requirement of a balance of power should not be demonised from a Christian perspective. It obliges recognition, even materially, of the existence and rights of others; it also means that resources are not too unevenly distributed and that there is a certain equality of strength, thus encouraging mutual recognition and stability.

Yet even at the time, perceptive critiques pointed to a fundamental weakness: a system resting solely on power and law remains structurally unstable and prone to degeneration. Significantly, many of these critiques came from Christian thinkers of the Romantic period, such as Friedrich Schlegel and Joseph Görres, who argued that what was missing was an ethical foundation, and spoke explicitly of love as the true ligament of the international and European order. Their language is at times strikingly similar to what Pope Leo XIV calls today a ‘civilisation of love’ as a necessary condition for a just and stable international order.

It was, however, only after the second and far more devastating collapse that a fuller understanding emerged. After 1945, decisive ethical contributions—deeply influenced by Christian thought—were made to the reconstruction of the international and European order. One might think, for example, of the work of Jacques Maritain in the intellectual process that led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This synthesis appears even more clearly in the European project itself. The Schuman Declaration represents an almost perfect blend of strategic rationality and Christian ethics: French national interest is not abandoned, but rather is transformed through a logic of reconciliation and forgiveness towards the former enemy. Power and ethics are not separated, but articulated together.

Overall, if one abstracts from these experiences, one can say that a functioning international order rests on three foundations: power, legitimacy and ethical grounding. When order collapses, it is rarely because rules are absent, but because they are no longer perceived as fair and are no longer sustained by a shared moral horizon.

It is therefore no surprise that the present international order appears fragile: today all three foundations are under strain—the balance of power is being transformed, legitimacy is being contested and ethical commitments are weakening under the pressure of *realpolitik*.

The unfinished agenda of *Magnifica Humanitas*: towards a Christian realism for international affairs?

This diagnosis points directly to the relevance of Catholic social doctrine. As Pope Leo XIV emphasises, the Church's social teaching is not a static set of prescriptions but a living tradition of 'discernment' in history, capable of interpreting epochal transformations in light of the dignity of the human person and the common good. The present moment, marked by geopolitical fragmentation and growing belligerent instincts, requires such renewed discernment.

In this respect, one of the key intellectual tasks for the coming years will be to articulate a doctrine of what one might call 'Christian' or 'spiritual' realism in international relations. As mentioned, the encyclical itself suggests this direction when it calls for a 'healthy realism'. Such realism must stem from a fundamental anthropological insight: the fallen nature of man, marked by original sin, which excludes the hubris of certain recent approaches to the global order. Over the past decades, what might be called liberal globalism has often assumed that the West could reshape the world in its own image, neglecting the voice, experience and otherness of the Global South. This project contained clear elements of what the encyclical uses the biblical image of the 'Tower of Babel' to convey—a form of homogeneous, technocratic universalism detached from a sense of limits and from a spirit of humility.

At the same time, this realism must reject the opposite temptation: cynical realpolitik, or the cult of force. The openness to transcendence and universality—so central to Christian thought and, one might argue with the German–American philosopher Eric Voegelin, to human experience as such—obliges us to maintain a link between politics and morality, even under conditions of tension and imperfection.²

In international relations theory, Christian realism is often associated with the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Yet, there is a rich and still insufficiently explored tradition of specifically Catholic insights, grounded in Catholic social teaching, which can contribute a more articulated and balanced version of realism—one in which the principles of dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity are better translated into the language of international order. International order ultimately fails when power, legitimacy and moral responsibility are allowed to drift apart.

Power and responsibility: the case of European defence

What does this mean in practice? Let us conclude with one concrete implication: that for European defence. This remains a sensitive topic in many Catholic contexts. Yet if we take seriously both the reality of the world we inhabit and the insights of Catholic social doctrine, a more balanced perspective emerges.

Theologically speaking, we live in a fallen world, a ‘valley of tears’ in which wheat and weeds are inextricably intertwined. Under such conditions, it is neither possible nor desirable to ‘reduce politics to morality’, as Pope Leo himself points out. Europe therefore requires the means to guarantee its own security and autonomous existence. Ideally, this should take the form of a coherent European defence rather than of fragmented national efforts. The decisive question, therefore, is not whether such power should exist, but how it is conceived, developed and exercised.

The contribution of Catholics, then, should not be to oppose defence as such in the name of a naive pacifism, but to act as its moral compass and ethical conscience. This was precisely the approach of Europe’s Christian Democratic founding fathers—Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide De Gasperi—who, as early as the 1950s, supported the European Defence Community not as a warmongering structure, but as the culmination of Europe’s path towards reconciliation, forgiveness and peace after the Second World War.

Our obligation, therefore, is to ensure that power remains ordered towards peace, that force remains subordinated to law and that law itself remains anchored in a deeper ethical horizon.

² E. Voegelin (1952), *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Without law, power becomes arbitrary; without justice, law becomes contested; without charity, neither can endure.

Conclusion: reuniting power, legitimacy and ethics

Like all major crises of international order, the one that we are witnessing is not merely institutional, but structural and, ultimately, anthropological. Rebuilding order will thus require not merely new mechanisms, but a renewed articulation of the relationship between power, legitimacy and ethics. Here, Catholic social doctrine, understood as a living tradition of discernment, can offer an important resource.

As we navigate a new epoch of global pluralism and instability while striving to maintain a modicum of unity and order, we should never forget the words of an ancient maxim that admirably expresses the Christian approach to European and international order: *in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas*: in essential matters, unity; in doubtful matters, freedom; in all things, charity.

Dr. Federico Ottavio Reho is Strategic Coordinator and Senior Research Officer at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies.

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