

PROMOTING A SAFE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT THE KEYS MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS OFFER ON SAFEGUARDING

Fr. Stanislaus Alla SJ

Introduction

Pope Leo XIV's encyclical Magnifica Humanitas (MH) presents a vision of human dignity in a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, technological power and social transformation. Although the encyclical primarily addresses the challenges of AI, its reflection on the dignity of the human person has significant implications for understanding sexual abuse, the protection of vulnerable adults and safeguarding within the Church.

The central concern of the encyclical is that human beings must never be reduced to instruments, objects or resources for the benefit of others. Every person possesses an inherent and inalienable dignity because he or she is created in the image and likeness of God. This dignity does not depend on social status, physical ability, productivity, age or personal circumstances.

Abuse is not merely a violation of personal boundaries; it is a profound violation of human dignity, freedom, trust and communion. Therefore, safeguarding must be understood not simply as an administrative responsibility but as an essential expression of the Church's mission to protect human life and promote the common good.

1. Human Dignity as the Foundation of Safeguarding

One of the fundamental principles of MH is the dignity of the human person. Sexual abuse occurs when one person violates another's bodily integrity, freedom and dignity. It frequently involves an unequal relationship in which the perpetrator exercises power, authority or influence over the victim. In ecclesial settings, this imbalance may arise between a priest and a layperson, a spiritual director and a retreatant, a religious superior and a member of the community, or a caregiver and a dependent adult.

The encyclical's emphasis on the intrinsic dignity of every human being challenges such relationships whenever authority becomes a means of domination rather than service. Safeguarding, therefore, begins with a fundamental conviction: every person is sacred, and no one may be treated as an object of another's power.

2. Sexual Abuse and the Abuse of Power

Pope Leo, in paragraph 89 in MH, addresses the need for justice within the Church itself. He calls for the purification of ecclesial relationships and structures from distortions that produce inequality, lack of transparency and abuse of power. He specifically identifies spiritual, economic, institutional, sexual and power-based abuse, as well as abuses of conscience. The Pope states that listening to victims is an integral part of the journey towards justice. This journey includes: a) acknowledge the harm done; b) Providing just reparation; and c) Taking measures to prevent abuse from happening again.

This passage is important because it recognises that sexual abuse cannot be understood merely as an individual moral failure. It may also reveal deeper institutional problems, such as misuse of authority, lack of accountability, secrecy and the failure to protect vulnerable persons. Sexual abuse also involves a profound betrayal of trust. In spiritual relationships, this betrayal becomes particularly painful because the victim may experience confusion concerning God, faith and the Church. Therefore, safeguarding must include not only physical protection but also emotional, psychological and spiritual support.

3. Safeguarding as a Culture of Prevention and Accountability

The encyclical's teaching on safeguarding goes beyond responding to abuse after it has occurred. It also invites the Church to examine the structures and relationships that make abuse possible. A genuine safeguarding culture requires: clear policies, accountability, safe reporting mechanisms, Appropriate formation and independent oversight.

The encyclical's insistence on acknowledging harm, providing reparation and preventing recurrence is especially important. Apologies and expressions of compassion, although necessary, cannot substitute for concrete action. Safeguarding must become part of the Church's ordinary life and not merely a response to public scandals.

4. Listening to Victims and Restoring Justice

One of the most important contributions of Magnifica Humanitas is its emphasis on the perspective of victims. Paragraph 138 acknowledges the painful truths that have emerged concerning members of the Church and ecclesial realities. It also recognises the contribution of journalists in bringing abuses to light and giving victims a voice.

The Pope insists that transparency is a grave responsibility of the Church herself. This teaching challenges the Church to develop a genuine attitude of listening. Victims of sexual abuse often experience shame, fear, isolation and a loss of trust. Some may struggle to speak because the perpetrator holds a position of authority or because they fear that their testimony will not be believed. Listening to victims requires more than hearing their words. It involves recognising their suffering, respecting their experiences and responding with compassion and justice. The Church must avoid attitudes that blame victims, minimise their experiences or pressure them into silence or premature reconciliation.

The encyclical's vision of justice includes reparation. This may involve psychological support, pastoral accompaniment, appropriate compensation and the restoration of dignity wherever possible. Reconciliation cannot be imposed upon victims. It must emerge from truth, justice, responsibility and respect for their freedom. Furthermore, the protection of victims must remain central even when the accused person is a respected priest, religious or influential member of the community.

5. Safeguarding in the Digital Age

Magnifica Humanitas, in paragraphs 141-142 warns about online grooming, blackmail, sexual exploitation of minors, manipulation of images and videos, and the misuse of digital technologies. He calls for cooperation among families, educational institutions, policymakers and technology providers to protect children and adolescents. Digital technologies can be used to manipulate, threaten, exploit or sexually abuse individuals. Artificial intelligence can also facilitate the creation of deceptive or non-consensual sexual images. Safeguarding must therefore extend beyond physical spaces such as churches, schools, hostels and retreat houses. It must also address online relationships, digital communication and the responsible use of technology.

The encyclical reminds us that technology must remain at the service of the human person. Any technological development that facilitates exploitation or undermines human dignity contradicts this fundamental principle.

Core Stance on Digital Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: The stance includes identifying risks, reviewing how early devise access impacts, and how limited is the role of parents. What is required is a call for shared responsibility, delay unsupervised devise access, practising ‘Digital Fasting,’ and avoid tech dependency for parenting. Eventually we have to cultivate hearts that love truth than prioritizing optimization. Apart from parents we need to involve the families, communities, parishes, schools and civil authorities so that together we can make strategies to confront digital sexual abuse and exploitation.

Conclusion

Magnifica Humanitas provides a significant theological foundation for understanding sexual abuse, vulnerable adults and safeguarding within the Church. Although it is not a specialised safeguarding document, its central principles of human dignity, justice, accountability, solidarity and care for the vulnerable offer essential guidance. The encyclical challenges the Church to examine not only individual behaviour but also institutional structures and relationships that may permit abuse. It calls for a Church that listens to victims, acknowledges harm, provides reparation and takes concrete measures to prevent abuse from happening again.

Ultimately, safeguarding is not merely about protecting institutions from scandal. It is about protecting persons because they are created in the image and likeness of God. A Church that truly embraces the vision of Magnifica Humanitas must become a community in which authority is exercised as service, vulnerability is met with compassion, truth is never concealed, and every person is protected from exploitation. The credibility of the Church's mission depends not only on what it proclaims about human dignity but also on how faithfully it safeguards that dignity in the lives of the most vulnerable.

Primary Reference

Pope Leo XIV. (25 May, 2026). Magnifica Humanitas: On safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence.



Fr. Stanislaus Alla, S.J.,
Vidyajyoti
23, Raj Niwas Marg
Delhi, 110054, INDIA