

Pieces of a Mosaic

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As this issue of *Ekklesia* was being put together, Pope Leo's encyclical *Magnifica humanitas*, on *Safeguarding the Human Person in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, was published. Over recent months, we had become increasingly aware of just how lively and urgent the debate surrounding Artificial Intelligence had become. Every form of media seemed to be overflowing with commentary on the subject.

So, we asked ourselves: should *Ekklesia* devote the focus of an issue to a topic that has already received so much attention? Our answer was “yes”, but with a clear purpose: to offer readers some keys for interpreting this phenomenon and, above all, some guidance and practical tools for families and pastoral ministry. In other words, our approach would be anthropological and educational, with the safeguarding and wellbeing of people at its heart.

And so, this issue took shape, bringing together insights from experts, the voices of younger generations, reflections from within the Church and accounts of initiatives already under way. Many of the contributions are brief, but we felt they could offer valuable food for thought. Now, with Pope Leo's encyclical, this mosaic has found a centre around which its various pieces can come together: an authoritative point of reference with which to engage. We were unable to read the encyclical before *Ekklesia* went to press, but we hope these pages will help readers to explore more deeply and put into practice the guidance Pope Leo offers in this, his first encyclical.

Another distinctive feature of this issue is the Witnesses section, devoted this time to a single figure: Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận, who was declared Venerable by Pope Francis on 4 May 2017. It is now 50 years since the well-known Vietnamese bishop, while enduring persecution, managed to write 1,001 short reflections for his people and have them smuggled out of prison. These reflections, challenges and words of encouragement were later gathered together in the celebrated volume *The Road of Hope*.

To mark this anniversary, the Postulation of his Cause of Beatification, together with the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, which is the promoter of the Cause, the Dicastery for the Clergy and the Città Nuova publishing house, organised a short conference. Hosted by the Diocese of Rome in the historic setting of the Lateran Palace, it was streamed by Vatican Media in seven languages. What emerged was a rich and multifaceted portrait of remarkable relevance today, revealing some lesser-known aspects of his life and witness. This issue of *Ekklesia* brings together material from the event in a special feature within the Witnesses section.

But let us return to Artificial Intelligence and – why not? – engage it in a brief conversation about our own magazine.

“What do you think of the magazine *Ekklesia*?” we asked ChatGPT.

Its courteous reply was: “My impression is that *Ekklesia* is quite an interesting magazine if it is read for what it sets out to be: not a periodical devoted to religious current affairs or apologetics, but a laboratory for ecclesial and pastoral life.”

Among its strengths, the platform identified: “Attention to current issues in the Church: synodality, shared responsibility between lay people and priests, dialogue and community; an approach that is less ideological and more experiential; space for ‘good practices’ and personal testimonies, rather than theological theory alone; an attempt to connect movements, parishes and everyday life.”

It added: “In short, I would not see it as a magazine for those who want to ‘keep informed about the Church’, but rather for those who want to ask themselves how to be Church today.”

After such generosity, we could hardly resist asking ChatGPT about the magazine’s weaknesses as well. It listed six: 1. A very clearly defined but not particularly neutral outlook; 2. A tendency to favour consensus and dialogue; 3. A strong synodal orientation; 4. More pastoral than strictly theological; 5. A possible tendency towards ecclesial optimism; 6. Plurality, yes, but within certain boundaries.

To tell the truth, we feel this describes us rather well – although we do not necessarily regard all of these as weaknesses that need to be overcome.

ChatGPT concluded on a conciliatory note: “In short, the most serious criticism is not that ‘it is badly done’, but rather that it *offers a particular vision of the Church, one that gives priority to communion and renewal, and this can limit critical conflict and more radical forms of pluralism.*” It then made us an offer: “If you like, I can also compare it with other Church magazines.” It was an intriguing proposal we could not resist.

In the comparative table ChatGPT produced, we found this description of the “typical reader” of *Ekklesia*: “Pastoral workers, committed lay people, communities.” And we found ourselves thinking: these are precisely the people we want to reach.

So much for Artificial Intelligence. Its answers encourage us, raise questions and stimulate reflection, and for that we are grateful. Yet what matters most to us is not a dialogue with algorithms, but a dialogue with our readers.

So, if you would like to, please do not hesitate to write to us!

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