

The ‘End’ of Education: Rediscovering Our Humanity

La “fine” dell’educazione: riscoprire la nostra umanità

Az oktatás „vége”: Az emberségünk újrafelfedezése

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Abstract

This study reflects on the purpose (“end” or *telos*) of education in light of recent Catholic teaching and the growing influence of artificial intelligence. Drawing particularly on *Antiqua et nova* and *Gravissimum educationis*, it argues that authentic education must remain holistic, cultivating intellectual, moral, spiritual, and relational dimensions of the human person. While AI can serve as a useful tool, excessive reliance on it risks weakening human intellect, agency, conscience, and ultimately spiritual life. The paper identifies two major challenges: safeguarding human personhood amid technological anthropomorphism and preserving the formative value of human work and intellectual effort. It concludes that education must prioritize human excellence, virtue, and the recognition of humanity’s transcendent destiny rather than mere productivity or technological efficiency.

Keywords: education, artificial intelligence, holistic formation, human dignity, intellect, virtue, Catholic education, technology ethics

Abstract

Questo studio riflette sul fine (*telos*) dell’educazione alla luce dell’insegnamento cattolico recente e dell’influenza crescente dell’intelligenza artificiale. Facendo riferimento in particolare a *Antiqua et nova* e *Gravissimum educationis*, sostiene che l’educazione autentica deve rimanere integrale, coltivando le dimensioni intellettuali, morali, spirituali e relazionali della persona umana. Sebbene l’IA possa essere uno strumento utile, un suo uso eccessivo rischia di indebolire l’intelletto, l’autonomia, la coscienza e la vita spirituale. Il contributo individua due sfide principali: la tutela della persona umana di fronte all’antropomorfizzazione tecnologica e la salvaguardia del valore formativo del lavoro e dell’impegno intellettuale. Si conclude che l’educazione deve privilegiare

l'eccellenza umana, la virtù e il destino trascendente dell'uomo, piuttosto che la mera produttività.

Parole chiave: educazione, intelligenza artificiale, formazione integrale, dignità umana, intelletto, virtù, etica della tecnologia, educazione cattolica

Absztrakt

A tanulmány az oktatás célját (*telosztát*) vizsgálja a kortárs katolikus tanítás és a mesterséges intelligencia növekvő hatásának fényében. Különösen az *Antiqua et nova* és a *Gravissimum educationis* dokumentumokra támaszkodva amellet érvel, hogy a hiteles nevelésnek holisztikusnak kell maradnia, vagyis az emberi személy értelmi, erkölcsi, lelki és kapcsolati dimenzióit egyaránt fejlesztenie kell. Bár az MI hasznos eszköz lehet, túlzott használata gyengítheti az emberi értelmet, önállóságot, lelkiismeretet és spirituális életet. A tanulmány két fő kihívást emel ki: az emberi személy méltóságának megőrzését a technológiai antropomorfizmus közepette, valamint a munka és az értelmi erőfeszítés formáló szerepének védelmét. Következtetése szerint az oktatásnak az emberi kiválóságot, erényeket és a transzcendens célt kell előtérbe helyezni a pusztá hatékonysággal szemben.

Kulcsszavak: oktatás, mesterséges intelligencia, holisztikus nevelés, emberi méltóság, értelem, erény, technológiai etika, katolikus pedagógia

When Pope Francis spoke at Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem, he described a university as “a ‘temple’ where knowledge is set free from the constraints of ‘accumulating and possessing’ and can thus become *culture*, that is, the ‘cultivation’ of our humanity and its foundational relationships: with the transcendent, with society, with history and with creation.”¹ This image of a university as a temple inspires my reflection here on the role of so-called artificial intelligence in education, because I wish to defend institutions dedicated to education as places to cultivate our spiritual life and the full flourishing of our humanity.

In January 2025, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education together published *Antiqua et nova*. This document is a “note” on so-called artificial intelligence and its relation to real or human intelligence.² It begins its section on education (§77–84) with a reference to *Gravissimum educationis*, which is the document promulgated at Vatican II that we celebrate at this conference.

The reference is a statement regarding the purpose or end (*telos*) of education: “True education strives to form individuals with a view toward their final end and the good of the society to which they belong.” (§77) Any effort to evaluate AI – or any other

¹ *Christ is Our Future: The Speeches of His Holiness Pope Francis During His Apostolic Visit to Hungary: Budapest 28–30 April 2023* (Magyar Katolikus Püspöki Konferencia, 2023), 95.

² *Antiqua et Nova: Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence* (January 14, 2025).

tool – should therefore consider whether it is successfully forming human beings for their final end and for the integral good of their society. In this regard, *Antiqua et nova* focuses on the crucial importance of a holistic education, that is, an education that touches upon all aspects of the human person: “intellectual, cultural, spiritual, etc.” This is opposed to an education limited to the mere transmission of facts and intellectual skills. *Antiqua et nova* cites Pope Francis insisting, “we must break that idea of education which holds that educating means filling one’s head with ideas.”

The Church’s call for holistic education leads the authors of *Antiqua et nova* to make observations about the role of so-called artificial intelligence. I would like now to develop a few of these observations briefly. In this way, I establish some context for the second half of my presentation, in which I highlight at least two concerns regarding so-called artificial intelligence and education.

Within a holistic or authentic education, *Antiqua et nova* highlights the relationship between teachers and students (§79). Teachers cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence, since teachers – as human persons – are able to support the integral growth of their students by modeling human virtues (“qualities”), by inspiring through their own love of learning and growth, and by affirming through personal attention the unique dignity and potential of every student. A computer, of course, cannot offer any of this because it is not a person. Because a computer is a machine, I cannot take the fact that it turns on whenever I press the right button as a sign of any virtue or affirmation. By contrast, a teacher who holds eye contact, who shows interest and answers my questions, who enthuses about his subject and reveals his own desire to grow, can indeed model virtue and communicate affirmation. As a person, a teacher is able to understand me and is free to be generous; therefore, when he knows me and chooses to engage with me in a shared search for the truth, he can affect me deeply. In a holistic education, we grow through personal relationships marked by love and a shared striving for the common good.

Moreover, teachers stand *in loco parentis*. Parents are the primary educators of their children. Formal education is thus an extension of the simultaneously natural and personal act of procreating and raising a child for union with God. We should no more entrust robots with the education of children than with their care. If there is no such thing as artificial life, then there is no such thing as artificial growth or education – unless by “artificial” we just mean fake or inauthentic.

Antiqua et nova acknowledges AI can be a helpful tool, if it is used prudently (§80). A teacher could use AI, for example, to expand access to information and provide tailored and immediate feedback. But *Antiqua et nova* warns that “excessive use of AI in education” risks weakening our intellect. When AI is no longer carefully used as a tool but is allowed to define the whole environment in which we communicate, learn and relate to others, we will frustrate the goal of education, since excessive or imprudent use diminishes our own agency and reasoning (§81). If I always look up facts and stop committing at least some of them to memory; or if I always rely on spelling, grammar

and stylistic tools, or revisions by an LLM, then my intellect, which is in many ways analogous to a muscle, will become weaker. Accordingly, we will be less able to know the truth *for ourselves* – as a personal act – and therefore less able *to delight* both in knowing the truth and in knowing reflexively that we know the truth.

I think this is an important point that can be deepened. Weakening our intellect also weakens our spiritual lives, since our conscience will become less self-aware and confident in itself; thus, it will also become more vulnerable to external manipulation. Our conscience will find it more difficult to make judgments, and so recognize its own activity, along with its dignity and responsibility before God. And as our intellect and conscience weaken, so can our perception of God himself. St. John Henry Newman argued that our “real apprehension” of God grows stronger the more *we* carry out the sometimes-hard work of discerning moral truth, and the more firmly and consistently *we* act upon it.³ Knowing God with real apprehension, or in an integral and compelling way, is contingent upon *the exercise* of our consciences, which involves *personal* judgment. Conviction is rooted in personal acts of the intellect. No one, Newman noted, would become a martyr for a notion, or “for a conclusion”⁴ to a syllogism. How much less should someone ever become a martyr for the output of an algorithm! Indeed, could anyone imagine accepting martyrdom for refusing to disavow the personally un-tes-tified output of an empty or symbolic process? Would such a death not be tragically inauthentic and dehumanizing? If we want to enjoy true and life-defining conviction

³ Newman recognized that right judgment and fidelity strengthen our real apprehension of God. If we are lazy about our intellectual life – that is, if we do not exercise ourselves by striving to make true judgments and choosing to follow those judgments with integrity – then our knowledge of God weakens. But if we are attentive, diligent and faithful to the living voice of conscience, our apprehension of him becomes stronger. “[T]he abstract proposition ‘There is a right and a wrong,’ as representing an act of inference, is received by the mind with a notional, not a real assent. However, in proportion as we obey the particular dictates which are its tokens, so are we led on more and more to view it in the association of those particulars, which are real, and virtually to change our notion of it into the image of that objective fact, which in each particular case it undeniably is” (John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, [University of Notre Dame Press, 1979], 70). Thus, “from the recurring instances in which conscience acts, forcing upon us importunately the mandate of a Superior, we have fresh and fresh evidence of the existence of a Sovereign Ruler, from whom those particular dictates which we experience proceed” (68).

⁴ “The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. Many a man will live and die upon a dogma: no man will be a martyr for a conclusion. A conclusion is but an opinion... [...] Logic makes but a sorry rhetoric with the multitude; first shoot round corners, and you may not despair of converting by a syllogism. [...] To most men argument makes the point in hand only more doubtful, and considerably less impressive. After all, man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal. [...] Life is not long enough for a religion of inferences; we shall never have done beginning, if we determine to begin with proof. [...] Resolve to believe nothing, and you must prove your proofs and analyze your elements, sinking farther and farther, and finding ‘in the lowest depth a lower deep,’ till you come to the broad bosom of skepticism. [...] Life is for action. If we insist on proofs for everything, we shall never come to action: to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith.” (*An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 89–91)

and integrity, and if we want to have the strength for such a union with Jesus as martyrdom, then we cannot allow our intellectual faculties to weaken. We must cherish and cultivate them by serious study – and thus by learning to use AI only prudently and ascetically.

It is one thing if a drill deprives my arm of opportunities to exercise the grip strength cultivated by using a screwdriver. It is quite another if using so-called artificial intelligence deprives my spirit of opportunities to strength its attention, perception, judgment and will – for these are necessary to know the truth and enjoy communion in love, which is the very reason for which we exist. Similarly, it is one thing to use a power tool, such as a chainsaw, after adequate training and with sufficient protection (e.g., protective gloves and eyewear). It is quite another to hand such a tool to an unprotected child, or to anyone unprepared to handle it, and just hope for the best.

To avoid any misunderstanding, let me say that I do not want to argue that we should refuse AI altogether. I am only trying to give due consideration to the very real dangers of such an intellectual power tool, so that we can discern how to use it wisely and for the true flourishing of our humanity.

The solution in *Antiqua et nova*, at least in this section, is not to shut off the internet. The solution involves making sure we do not neglect to form the intellect and therefore that we “develop a discerning approach to the use of data and content collected on the web or produced by artificial intelligence systems” (§82). So, the document calls us to promote “critical thinking” – that is, we must be able to *judge* the information we receive. Rather than mindlessly copying and pasting the results of AI, we must be able to verify them independently. Thus, a tool like spellcheck is helpful if it corrects a typo; but if I rely on it so much that I forget how to spell and allow myself to defer uncritically to suggestions of my word processor (which, of course, can be wrong), then I have allowed my intellect to become too weak. The same is true for calculators and the manipulation of numbers, for Google Maps and the knowledge of our surroundings, and for many other tools. Of course, not every intellectual skill is equally vital. But the closer a skill touches our capacity for personal and moral judgments, the more spiritually crippled we are if it atrophies.

1. Addressing the Existential Crisis – Discovering Our Humanity

On the basis of *Antiqua et nova*, *Gravissimum educationis*, and my own experience as an educator, I would like now to highlight at least two spiritual challenges for educators.

Antiqua et nova, following *Gravissimum educationis*, rightly focuses on the *integral* character of education, and the importance of educating students for their final end. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* proclaims, the final end for human beings is to share in the “blessed life” of God, and thus “to seek him, to know him, to love him with all [their] strength” (CCC §1). In this regard, I would like to make two points:

First, we must develop and deploy technologies in ways *that form us to recognize our personhood*, if we are ever to educate ourselves for our final end. For, if we think we are our own artifacts, like another of our machines, we will simply fail to embrace, or even to recognize, the final end given to us by our Creator. Second, we must recognize *that our final end is a life of virtue*, or a life of excellence in spiritual acts like knowledge, love and communion.⁵ For, if we think the successful use of technology is measured simply by the products we produce, and if we therefore fail to pay attention to the intransitive effects this use has on our excellence, then we risk frustrating our final end.

In my experience, one vital area of concern regarding the use of AI is the risk we all have of losing sight of our personhood and therefore of our final end. If we are confused about the difference between a human being created in the image of God and a computer, then we are at risk of losing sight of our final end and thus also the *telos* of our education. We should, accordingly, promote the development of technologies that avoid fostering this confusion. For example, we should not make robots that mimic human beings and thereby blur the distinction in our minds and culture. We should humbly accept our humanity, and specifically our tendency to anthropomorphize animals and inanimate objects. We should try to shape our perceptions responsibly to recognize the truth as easily as possible. To take an image from *Star Wars*, we should make robots more like R2-D2 (but without the cute anthropomorphizing noises) and less like the humanoid C-3P0. Similarly, we should avoid things like the pseudo-conversational formats of many 'AI assistants' (and children's toys!) currently in fashion. This format is not 'user friendly' or benign because it manipulates the user by falsely stimulating our social brains (thereby increasing our engagement and thus also the data and profit accrued by the managing company). Such a format easily confuses our brains and threatens our strength for real relationships. We have all likely seen stories in the news about the psychological trauma that pseudo-conversational chatbots can inflict. Such tragic stories of "AI psychosis" represent an extreme, but we should beware that small steps could easily contribute to terrible delusions in the long run. I imagine everyone would think I am very confused – and be worried about me – if I were to converse with a coffee machine. So, why would we *encourage* ourselves to converse with computers? Why do we not perceive a similar irony in the latter situation? Are

⁵ *Gravissimum educationis* §1 – a section titled "The Meaning of the Universal Right to Education" – is sensitive to the need for education to *strengthen* the human being. This kind of education is a *right* because it serves the end of human beings: "Therefore children and young people must be helped, with the aid of the latest advances in psychology and the arts and science of teaching, to develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments so that they may gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility in striving endlessly to form their own lives properly and in pursuing true freedom as they surmount the vicissitudes of life with courage and constancy." "This sacred synod likewise declares that children and young people have a right to be motivated to appraise moral values with a right conscience, to embrace them with a personal adherence, together with a deeper knowledge and love of God." In the next section, the document refers to this education as "the maturing of a human person" (§2).

our instinctive perceptions already so much in danger of distortion? To better shape our perceptions and more easily dwell in the peace of truth, AI tools should prompt and provide search results in something like the style of an encyclopedia – and not a chat.

We should also find ways to teach philosophical insights about form and matter, and about the difference between nature and artifact. It seems to me that even educated people often do not know how to make these distinctions; meanwhile, these distinctions are some of the most intellectually and spiritually liberating insights we can achieve in an education. We need to recover the *ratio fidei* in this regard, so that we can announce convincingly the great difference between a metaphysical unity – a natural form, a work of the Creator – and the projection of a human mind into a collection of materials. This will help us defend the dignity of the human being, and it will free us from the deception of attributing a substantial form to one of our machines, and therefore from ever thinking ‘it’ is in any way ‘intelligent’ – or even ‘is’ in the way that a natural substance is. This is why I try to avoid an unqualified use of the phrase “artificial intelligence,” which is a contradiction in terms. Metaphysically, there is no substance – let alone any agency or proper activity – in ‘a’ computer. ‘It’ is a brilliantly arranged sum of parts, whose mechanical and electrical interactions provide us with a dynamic map that allows us to record and manipulate symbols in unimaginably complicated and wonderful ways.⁶

In this respect, we could make common cause with deconstructionists like Friedrich Nietzsche, at least when it comes to resisting the temptation to follow ‘the deceptions of grammar’ by attributing substance and agency to a machine. Nietzsche argued that we are incorrect when we say ‘the lightning’ flashes, because there is no such independent reality that exists and then moves to flash; that is to say, what we call lightning is the flash itself. Similarly, we are incorrect when we say ‘the computer’ computes – for in any completed circuit, whether in the sky or in the silicon, there is no doer, only the deed.⁷ Of course, we should also renew metaphysics by rediscovering classical authors,

⁶ I am sure my way of speaking could be improved, and it is admittedly idiosyncratic. In any case, we should learn to name our artifacts with more precision, lest we perpetuate disruptive philosophical confusions. The word “computer,” for example, is incorrect: the machine is not an agent computing. Instead, I would call it something like a “dynamic map.” Such a phrase communicates we are dealing with an instrument or tool for *our* agency. It communicates the idea that the tool has value as a *symbolic representation*. And it acknowledges the mystifying character of these great machines whose architecture allows some of their components to be rearranged depending on the information we want to record or calculate. If we continue to call a computer “a computer,” we should do it with the same sense in which we call a hammer “a hammer” – everyone knows *I am the one hammering* whenever I use a hammer; just so, it should also be clear that *I am the one computing* whenever I use a computer.

⁷ Nietzsche makes the point in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay, §13: “For just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an *action*, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was *free* to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything.” (*On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* [Vintage Books, 1989], 45).

such as Aristotle, Plato, and their medieval successors. In one way or another, we need to respond to the existential crisis looming in the hearts of our contemporaries and especially our children and students. We must educate them to recognize their own humanity. In this way, we will nourish their faith in their final end.

2. Educating for Excellence – Achieving Our Humanity

Gravissimum educationis says education should promote “the common good” (§1), and concretely it refers to human physical, moral and intellectual development, along with maturity, responsibility and authentic freedom.

A true education, in other words, should aim at *human excellence* – individually and socially. We do not educate simply to prepare individuals to take their place in an assembly line manufacturing products for trade. The “universal right” for an education is not only, and not even essentially, about job skills. It is about our excellence and happiness, or what is classically identified with the virtues leading to our final end.⁸ This excellence, of course, involves the capacity to contribute in some way to the material flourishing of a community, but it is not simply about production.

This is crucial to say, for it seems we are tempted by utopias of laziness in which all our work is done for us, and thus we are at risk of losing sight of the goodness of work and of striving for excellence. Therefore, a sincere student today might ask, for example, why we should still learn to write if an LLM can produce a verbal product.

This perspective is at odds with a truly human understanding of work. In *Laborem exercens*, St. John Paul II noted that “even in the age of ever more mechanized ‘work,’ *the proper subject of work continues to be man.*” (§5) A machine does not work. Technology is a tool for the human being, who is the real subject of work, and for whom work remains an essential activity regardless of his tools. St. John Paul II notes,

“Understood in this case not as a capacity or aptitude for work, but rather as a whole set of instruments which man uses in his work, technology is undoubtedly man’s ally. It facilitates his work, perfects, accelerates and augments it. [...] However, it is also a fact that, in some instances, technology can cease to be man’s ally and become almost his enemy, as when the mechanization of work ‘supplants’ him, taking away all personal satisfac-

Of course, I do not agree with Nietzsche’s extension of his point from electrical to moral phenomena, or from lightning to the human being. A reasonable account of the world (and of reason itself) will include the apprehension of agents – of doers behind the deeds.

⁸ cf. *Gravissimum educationis* §1. Pope Leo XIV also focuses on the centrality of the human person and the formation of virtue in *Disegnare nuove mappe de Speranza* (October 27, 2025) §5.1: “L’educazione non è solo trasmissione di contenuti, ma apprendistato di virtù.” In §9.1, he addresses the challenge of technology: “Le tecnologie devono servire la persona, non sostituirla; devono arricchire il processo di apprendimento, non impoverire relazioni e comunità.”

tion and the incentive to creativity and responsibility, when it deprives many workers of their previous employment, or when, through exalting the machine, it reduces man to the status of its slave.” (§5)

Whenever a tool fails to foster what St. John Paul II calls the “subjective dimension”⁹ of work – namely, the increase in satisfaction, creativity, responsibility and excellence of the human person – it must be reconsidered. For, as *Gaudium et spes* insisted, “A man is more precious for what he is than for what he has.”¹⁰ Our work should lead us to growth, and not merely to production. If we think all our work can eventually be replaced by our tools, it is because we have failed to understand all that we should expect from our work. A machine might produce a functional product; but it cannot be responsible, excellent or happy for us. And at the end of the day, our education and economy should be about promoting happiness and not just items for trade and consumption.

I am far from having a comprehensive vision for how to renew education to face the exciting challenges of our times. But I think a new emphasis on sports and the arts could help us draw attention once again to the delights of virtue. For even though we could create a machine able to stab an arrow into a bullseye with remarkable precision and consistency, we still nonetheless have competitions for archery. Why? Because the product of a bullseye with an arrow is not the point – the human excellence is. Everyone still seems to understand this, since today we still admire athletic achievement. We can help our students wonder at this admiration. And once we help them see the intrinsic delights of virtue, we can outline for them an adequate anthropology and catalog for them the long list of human excellences to which we should aspire – physical, intellectual, social and religious. Perhaps one day the question – ‘Why would I want to learn to write if ChatGPT can write for me?’ – will sound just as silly as the question – ‘Why would anyone want to learn to shoot an arrow if a machine can do it for us?’ At the same time, this anthropology should show to our students that they are

⁹ “Man has to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the ‘image of God’ he is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization. *As a person, man is therefore the subject of work.* As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfil the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity. [...] And so this ‘dominion’ spoken of in the biblical text being meditated upon here refers not only to the objective dimension of work but at the same time introduces us to an understanding of its subjective dimension. [...] This dominion, in a certain sense, refers to the subjective dimension even more than to the objective one: this dimension conditions *the very ethical nature of work.* In fact there is no doubt that human work has an ethical value of its own, which clearly and directly remain linked to the fact that the one who carries it out is a person, a conscious and free subject, that is to say a subject that decides about himself.” (*Laborem exercens* §6)

¹⁰ *Gaudium et spes* §35.

“wonderfully made” (cf. Psalm 139:14) and so encourage them to turn in thanksgiving to their Creator and trust in his design.

If I had more time, I would like to raise a third concern: namely, if we are to educate our students for our final end, then we need a deeply Christocentric education. The Church most essentially offers Jesus to the world, and therefore our mission as Catholic educators is fundamentally to form our students for deeper union with him. Our concerns about faith and reason, integral development, social justice and other worthy topics must be relativized as aspects of our most essential mission to help our students discover their vocations – their mystical identities as members of the Body of Christ. In other words, if we are ever able to persuade society not to reduce education to job training, let us not reduce it to intellectual or social projects. In addition to drawing attention to the dangers posed to our “humanity” – most generally considered – by the imprudent use of so-called artificial intelligence, we should also point out the tragedy of failing to become the irreplaceable persons we are all called to be in God’s design. We will become more sensitive to imprudent uses of so-called artificial intelligence, the more sensitive we are to the delights of authentic diversity and to the joy of living out our vocations. We will feel more powerfully the imperative to cultivate our spiritual gifts and protect our hearts from the thinning and homogenizing tendencies of digital abstractions and systems, the more we understand our lives as precious opportunities for friendship with Christ and for rising to the unique mission conceived in the mind of the Creator for each and every one of us.