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Copies of *Magnifica Humanitas* are seen at the Vatican's Synod Hall May 25, 2026.
(OSV News/Vatican Media/Simone Risoluti)



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In *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo XIV reflects on what it means for humans to flourish. One point he raises concerning human flourishing has received little attention. He writes, "It is important to move beyond the current metrics of development — which for more than eighty years have been tied to the concept of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) — since these metrics almost systematically neglect aspects essential to the overall wellbeing of people and the environment."

Gross domestic product is the total market value of all of the final goods and services which are produced and rendered during a given time. One can see Leo's concern with GDP as the ideal for development. If we are concerned primarily with market value, workers can be used and discarded. The environment is not ours to steward sustainably, but rather ours to use up. It makes great sense to find a different path. But what is it to "move beyond" these metrics? Does it mean developing new metrics or does it mean adopting a gaze less focused on metrics?

Bhutan's focus on "Gross National Happiness" was a first instance of moving beyond GDP by developing a new metric. Many more such measures have followed. Their names, focused on such things as "happiness" and "flourishing," give these metrics a great allure. But this allure can distract from their problems.

For example, the much-utilized (translated into more than 40 languages) [Harvard Flourishing Measure](#) focuses on six dimensions: happiness and life satisfaction; mental and physical health; meaning and purpose; character and virtue; close social relationships; and financial and material stability. These seem like the sorts of things about which we should care. But consider the *measure* of character and virtue. It uses just two items, such as "I always act to promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations." Answers range from 0 (not true of me) to 10 (completely true of me). One might think that the virtuous answer (because of its honesty) would be 0. Who among us *always* acts to promote the good? But the highest score is, instead, a 10. Then there is the problem of assessing ourselves. How often have we *thought* we were promoting the good only to find later that we did not understand and so were, instead, damaging the good? There is an enormous gap between what these measures say they are measuring and what is actually measured.

Should we care about that gap? Yes, just as we should care about the gap between GDP and what we really want our target to be. As an analogy, consider the US News rankings of colleges and universities. For years, one metric was the percentage of courses taught that had fewer than 20 students. While smaller class size is often conducive to learning, this measure encouraged 19-person sections, as a means of gaming the system — and rewarding already-rich universities that could afford the game, without any clear benefit over offering 20-person sections. There is a gap between class size and education and that gap needed more attention in the US News metric.

Jesus teaches us in the Gospels that our hearts live where we find our treasures. If our treasure is to get people to say, "I always act to promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations," it is likely that means will be found to get people to say that, but will those efforts make people more virtuous, or, paradoxically, less virtuous, given the gap between virtue and the measure of it?

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There is also nothing distinctly Catholic about extant measures of flourishing. Leo writes: "The dignity inscribed in each of us by the Holy Spirit can also be seen in our capacity to reflect critically, choose and love freely, and form authentic relationships." How do we assess loving God and neighbor? Surely not with two questions asking us whether we love God and neighbor.

There is a further danger here. It is easy to see that *GDP* misses something fundamental and so we can easily know that we need to move beyond the measure. But when people hear that "*flourishing*" was measured, it will be much harder for them to recognize that something is missing. By analogy, there has been an explosion of research to increase "happiness." But that which increases fleeting happiness might undermine the flourishing life. There is [some evidence](#) that the *pursuit* of happiness can interfere with the *experience* of happiness. Increasing happiness seems such an obvious good, more obvious than GDP, and so the problems of the approaches used to build happiness can be missed. Might the same blindness occur in the pursuit of metrics of flourishing?

There is a second way to understand "moving beyond metrics like GDP." Perhaps this means moving beyond a *focus* on metrics rather than a movement to *different* metrics. In *Magnifica Humanitas*, Leo writes: "We must, then, avoid the 'Babel syndrome,' namely ... the pretense that a single language — even a digital one — can translate everything, including the mystery of the person, into data and performance." Metrics can too easily provide that pretense. In his book *Informal Sociology*, William Bruce Cameron wrote, "not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

In other areas of our lives, we do not so narrowly focus on metrics. For instance, when we go to the doctor, we do not expect a single measure of our overall physical flourishing. Rather, we expect an expert to explore all manner of different aspects of our physical functioning, including useful metrics, all as assessed within the specific contexts of our very particular lives. A metric such as low levels of sleep is understood differently after a death in the family as compared to other contexts. Good physicians understand the body, and the context in which bodies exist, rather than only understanding metrics. Their treasure is our health, not a metric of our health.

What might this de-emphasis on metrics look like in regard to flourishing as Catholics? Perhaps in part it involves closer examination of our own lives and drawing from exemplars whose circumstances have been similar to ours. Óscar Romero and Catherine of Siena flourished by loving in particular ways, speaking truth to power even as they lived in difficult circumstances. A metric of the great poverty of Romero's El Salvador would be informative, but not in the same way that his life was informative. Loving, full lives are not reducible to metrics, whether GDP or "flourishing."

And we all have the exemplar of Jesus. When Jesus asked the Twelve whether they, too, would leave him, Peter replied, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." He did not reply, "You have the words that will bring us GDP and high scores on metrics of flourishing."

This story appears in the **AI Encyclical: Magnifica Humanitas** feature series. [View the full series.](#)