

EXCERPTS

I would rather like to draw your attention first of all to the incredible benefits that the new technologies, and AI systems in particular, are already bringing to our history.

In the field of health care, diagnostics has been dramatically enhanced by these systems capable of detecting or predicting diseases practically invisible to the human eye. Developments have been recorded in laboratories and in medical education, where digital modelling has made giant steps forward in the training of future doctors.

There are also countless applications of AI in the world of agriculture, especially in those areas not yet exploited with intensive and often destructive practices. Today, small farming villages have at their disposal, by means of low-cost smartphones, accurate weather forecasts, systems for optimising farming and trading, and effective tools to manage resources and raw materials.

Finally, if we look at the world of communication and information management, we cannot but be amazed at the ease we have in sharing content, getting hold of accurate data, reading documents in other languages. (...)

Social forms in the digital age

First of all, we must acknowledge that the internet and the digital technologies are radically changing social structures. I do not have the time to illustrate these processes in detail. I only mention them because of the impact that these transformations also have on church life.

The Internet, at least on a superficial level, replaces a pyramidal view of society with a horizontal and equal one. Truth is no longer the prerogative of established and recognised authorities, but is the fruit of a continuous dialogic quest involving a thousand voices. The social media allow individuals to play a protagonist role (with special attention to women and people living in rural areas) in a manner hitherto unimaginable (and perhaps even undesirable for some). (...)

Allow me to make two observations:

1. the first is sociological. We often associate the digital transformation with the world of youth, with a fracture in the transmission of knowledge and faith between generations, with easy access to immoral experiences. This is true but partial: the largest consumers of online porn in India are adults between the ages of 25 and 34 (husbands and fathers of children, or rather husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, since 33% of users are women). Online Indian gamers are also 59% adults aged between 25 and 44. Beware of reducing this to a youth issue, even though this “toxic” exposure on the young and very young can have even more disruptive effects.
2. The second is more theological. The passage from authority to authoritativeness, from instruction to testimony (what else are influencers?), from verticality to synodality, are all passages that return (or at least allude) to evangelical dynamisms. Why consider them only in their destructive implications?

(...)

There are two limiting perspectives that the current debate on AI seems to impose on our reflections on what is human.

1. The reason why we are worried about these systems is that they emulate certain processes that we associate with human intelligence. And this is why we try to mark the difference between us and them, as if our humanity were to reside in this faculty. This is not true: we are not our intelligence alone, and any discourse that goes in this direction is reductive.
2. We also are not our data alone. Dataism (a pseudo-religious form that springs from the incredible predictive power of machine learning systems) wishes to reduce us to the (innumerable) traces we leave behind.

AI systems, seen from the perspective of their direst anthropological challenge, require us to return to talking about humans and their bodies. The urgent topic is the flesh, and, if you please, we are experts in this matter. We are rooted in the event of the incarnation of the Son of God, in a resurrected body that St Thomas (the evangeliser of India) wishes to be able to touch, in the promise of the resurrection of the flesh that we proclaim in the Apostles’ Creed.

Preserving the flesh is among the urgent tasks of Christians in this digital age. A proclamation, that of the irrepressibility of bodies, which must be passionate, almost carnal. Or, as Cardinal Filipe Neri said last December in Goa at the SIGNIS national meeting: 'the truth with heart'. (...)

Dear friends, the great transformations which are taking place should not frighten us. They are rather a call to the responsibility that the Gospel demands of us towards the human life inhabiting this planet. The memory of the Easter of Jesus makes us women and men who take responsibility for the future. This is what Pope Francis is reminding us of when he states that “Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.”

Thank you.