

**POPE FRANCIS SPEECH  
TO THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE  
JANUARY 25 2019**

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My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I welcome you most cordially and I thank Archbishop Paglia for his kind words. Our meeting is taking place during a great Jubilee for the Pontifical Academy for Life— the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of its Founding. For this important occasion, last month I sent a letter entitled *Humana Communitas* to your President. What led me to write that letter was first of all to thank all the Presidents who have succeeded one another at the helm of the Academy and all the Members for their talented service and generous commitment in protecting and promoting human life over these past twenty-five years.

We all know the difficulties our world is going through. The fabric of family and societal relationships is becoming ever more threadbare and there is a growing tendency to close ourselves off within ourselves and our own interests, with serious consequences for the “great and crucial question of the unity of the human family and its future.” (H.C., 2) This presents us with a great paradox: just when humanity possesses the scientific and technical ability to procure well-being that is spread fairly, as God would wish, we see instead conflicts that are increasingly bitter and an increase in inequalities.

The Enlightenment myth of progress is disappearing and the capabilities that come one after another in science and technology don’t always produce the desired results. In fact, on the one hand technological development has allowed us to solve problems that until a few years ago were insurmountable—and we are grateful to the scientists who made those breakthroughs; but on the other hand, difficulties and dangers have arisen that are sometimes more insidious than what went before. Being “able to do” something threatens to overshadow *who* is acting and *for whom* something is being done. The technocratic system that is based on the criterion of efficiency says nothing to answer the deepest questions that man asks himself. And if indeed we cannot do without technology’s resources, we must recognize that by using them we subjugate ourselves to it. Still, technology is a sign of humanity. It shouldn’t be seen as a force that is outside us and hostile but rather as a product of our genius through which we obtain what is necessary for our lives and that of others. It is a specifically human way of living in the world. Nevertheless, today’s evolution of technical ability leads to a dangerous bewitchment—instead of providing human life with the tools that improve life, we run the risk of handing life over to be ruled those tools and they end up deciding the value of life. This reversal is destined to have terrible consequences: not only will machines operate themselves, they will end up operating humans. Human reason is thus reduced to a thought process

without effects that is unworthy of human beings.

We see, unfortunately, the serious damage caused to the planet, our common home, by the indiscriminate use of technology. For this reason, global bioethics is an important front on which to do battle. It reveals our awareness of the profound effects of environmental and social factors on health and life. This is an approach that is very much attuned with the integral ecology that I described and promoted in the Encyclical *Laudato si'*. In addition, in today's world, marked by close interaction among diverse cultures, we must bring to bear our specific contribution as believers to the search for operational criteria that can be universally shared, that can become points of common reference for those who have the serious responsibility of making decisions at a national and international level. This also means getting involved in the question of human rights, and their corresponding duties. This is the field in which to carry out common research leading to a universal ethic, an area where tradition has addressed many questions by drawing on the patrimony of natural law.

The Letter *Humana Communitas* speaks explicitly of “emergent” and “convergent” technologies. The possibility of intervening on living material of ever-decreasing dimensions, of processing ever greater volumes of data, of monitoring—and manipulating—cognitive and deliberative cerebral processes, has enormous implications. It approaches the threshold of the biological specificity and spiritual uniqueness of humanity. It was in this sense that I stated the “distinctiveness of human life is an absolute good.” (H.C., 4)

This bears repeating: “Artificial intelligence, robotics, and other technological innovations are to be used in a way that serves humanity and the protection of our common home, rather than the exact opposite, which, as various studies reveal, unfortunately often happens.” (*Message to the World Economic Forum at Davos, January 12, 2018*) The inherent dignity of every human being is to be firmly fixed at the center of our reflection and our action.

In his regard, it must be noted that the term “artificial intelligence”—even though it produces a certain effect, can be misleading. The term hides the fact that—despite the performance of certain low-level activities (that was the original connotation of the word “robot”)—these automatic actions are qualitatively different from the uniquely human activities of knowing and acting. For this reason, artificial beings can become dangerous to society. Likewise, there is already the risk that man will become technologized instead of technology becoming humanized. The so-called “intelligent machines” are being too hastily endowed with abilities that are specifically human.

We must understand better what, in this context, are the meanings of intelligence, conscience and emotivity, affective intentionality and moral action. Artificial devices that simulate human abilities are in fact without human characteristics.

We must be aware of this in order to orient the regulation of the way machines are used, and of related research, toward constructive and fair interaction between human beings and the most recent machines. Their numbers are in fact increasing throughout the world and they are

transforming the way we live our lives. If we are able to make their presence beneficial to our lives, the extraordinary possibilities of these new developments will be able to be realized by every individual and all of humanity.

The debate underway among specialists shows the serious problems involved in controlling the algorithms that process great quantities of data. Likewise, the technologies for genetic and cerebral manipulation raise serious ethical questions. In any event, the attempt to explain the whole of thought, sensibility, and the human psyche on the basis of the functional sum of their physical and organic parts does not take into account the emergence of the phenomena of experience and consciousness. The human phenomenon surpasses the result of the mere calculable assemblage of its individual elements. Even in this context, the axiom according to which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts takes on new depth and relevance. (Cf. Exhort. Ap. *Evangelii gaudium*, 234-237)

On the other hand, but in this same line of the complex synergy of *psiche* and *techne*, that which we learn about cerebral activity provides us with new indications about how to understand consciousness (one's own and that of the world) and the human body itself. It is not possible to prescind from the web of multiple relationships if we are to acquire a greater understanding of the entire human dimension.

Certainly, we cannot draw conclusions from the data of empirical science. But we can draw from them, even from theology, certain indications that are instructive for our anthropological reflections, just as we have done throughout the history of science. It would be decidedly contrary to our most valid tradition to cling to anachronistic conceptual apparatus that is unable to dialogue adequately with changes in the concept of nature and constructs, of constraints and freedom, of means and end, that have been introduced by the new culture of action proper to the technological age. We are called to place ourselves on the path taken with determination by the Second Vatican Council, which calls for a renewal of theological disciplines and a critical reflection on the relationship between Christian faith and moral action. (cfr. *Optatam totius*, 16)

Our commitment—intellectual and specialist—will be a point of pride for us in our participation in an ethical alliance in favor of human life. It is now urgent, in a context in which ever more sophisticated technological means involve directly the human qualities of the body and the psyche, to develop a project that can be shared with all the men and women engaged in scientific research and in healthcare. This is a difficult task, given the hectic pace of innovation. The example of intelligent and believing teachers who have embarked with wisdom and boldness on a voyage of discovery with their contemporaries, with the goal of understanding the patrimony of faith to a degree that is worthy of man, should encourage us and give us support.

I ask you to continue your study and research in order that your work of promoting and defending life may be ever more effective and fruitful. May the Blessed Mother assist you and my blessing accompany you. And please do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.