

# **The Origin and the Mission of the Pontifical Academy for Life**

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## **A new scenario**

Our world is changing at an ever-increasing rate. And the greatest acceleration is in technology, whose development is far more rapid than that of other sciences such as philosophy, law, and theology: the sciences designated to offer an holistic comprehension of human life and human society.

Our lives are changing at an ever-increasing rate. We are undergoing the positive features of the new culture of individual freedom and dignity that has grown up in our history as a flowering of the seed planted by Christianity. At the same time, we must also be very clear-headed and resolute in confronting the contradictions of extreme individualism and moral relativity that put at risk the humanity of that freedom and personal dignity. Today, we are called to a very careful discernment of the “signs of the times.”

A dramatic paradox has developed: just now when humanity possesses the technical-scientific ability to reach generalized well-being, which could favor an appropriate universal distribution of the earth’s resources—as in God’s vision, expressed in the Social Teaching of the Church and even more so in Holy Scripture—we see a worsening of conflicts, spurred by growing inequalities. The decline of the Enlightenment myth of progress and the reversal of the appeal of techno-scientific activity is well known.

Our world, our lives are very complex , borderless and fluid—thanks to technology, the economy and a quest for efficiency, we are faced with a cultural and social construct of relation less individuals who in the worship of their own autonomy day by day destroy the memories of the roots and relationships that formed them; first of all the family bond. Freedom cannot grow, and human beings cannot flourish when their roots dry up and are destroyed.

If what drives us is the acquisition of greater power and the satisfaction of our own desires, we will be unable to appreciate the value of stable relationships, of care and assistance to others, of

welcome and solidarity. I think an awareness of this point is the anthropologic key that opens for us an understanding of the serious matters: transgenderism, the ideological take-over of gender questions, biotechnology, assisted suicide.

### **New challenges**

In a special way, new technologies, by reason of the satisfaction that they bring, their complexity, and their great efficiency, have become the touchstone by which today's ethical challenges are judged. The search for operational perfection—as measured by technical efficiency—is more and more becoming the way that life in all its complexity is being judged.

Using the means at our disposal today, the human being—and really all forms of life—can be analyzed, studied and manipulated in its least detail. The possibility for that level of manipulation of sensory/motor, neuro-cognitive and genetic-evolutionary structures opens up new and undesirable horizons that we must learn to encompass intellectually in a way that makes possible ethical-humanistic solutions that are equal to the enormous possibilities, both positive and negative, for civil society and more generally for all forms of human interaction.

Technologically advanced society is preparing for a qualitative leap. Science today is able to intervene in the life of each individual and on future generations without necessarily offering any improvement in the conditions for human existence. Man's desire to rule over nature soon becomes a desire in every heart to control, shape and empower the biological self, and the only reality worth relying on seems today to be the life that man believes he can build with his own hands.

The promise of a longer life, and even of immortality, is the most convincing argument that technological society can offer. Who of us would give up the possibility of a longer, healthier life just so as not to exceed the traditional "natural" life expectancy of "threescore and ten" years? Why should we turn down the possibility that technology offers of overcoming all limits? Let me give you three points to think about:

1. A number of studies predict that in the future health care will be one of the central elements of Western economies by reason of the development of efficient preventive medicine protocols in addition to the traditional treatment of acute and chronic illness.

2. With technology, we will soon be able to manage all the variables connected with human reproduction, variables that until now have been left to “nature” or “chance.” Why should we still leave reproduction to chance and in addition burden it with the potentially limiting circumstances of the binding affective relationship known as marriage when we can manage the entire process all by ourselves?

3. The development of robotics and the so called “Artificial intelligence”, the increasing integrating of man and machine reopens the question of how we can speak today about “nature.” Does it still make sense to speak about a basic “human nature” and if so, how do we do so in a way that is not merely defensive in a world where everyone else believes in technology, at least on a practical level?

The answer to these questions is, obviously crucial. We must ask ourselves if the possible responses are already preconditioned by language that is deeply influenced by a culture that is immanentistic and scientific and that has monopolized our thinking, making it no longer able to appreciate other dimensions of reality.

Certainly, we must ask ourselves whether we can fully understand the challenges that we are facing and still remain within the linguistic and cultural horizons of technology, or whether instead we also need a “conversion” of our minds and language, opening ourselves to broader horizons that are able to put in their proper place all the potentialities that can form humanity.

### **Humana Communitas**

Recently, Pope Francis addressed a letter to the Pontifical Academy for Life on the occasion of its twenty-fifth Anniversary, titled *Humana Communitas*. As you know, the Academy was founded by St. John Paul II in 1994, at the suggestion of the Servant of God and great scientist Jérôme Lejeune. On October 18, 2016, a new Academy Statute was promulgated to respond to the many socio-cultural changes that have taken place in recent years. It not only confirms the mission of the Academy for the protection and promotion of human life in all the stages, but it also encourages reflection and research on today’s situations to enable that mission to be carried out more effectively.

The new Statute makes it clear that the Academy’s mission now calls on it to

- 1) widen its scope of reflection, not limiting itself to addressing “specific situations of ethical, social or legal conflict,”
- 2) articulate an anthropology that sets the practical and theoretical premises for “conduct consistent with the dignity of the human person,”
- 3) make sure it has the tools to critically examine “the theory and practice of science and technology as they interact with life, its meaning and its value.”

In addition, the new Statute calls on the Academy to become more and more a place of competent and respectful meeting and dialogue among experts, including those from other religious traditions as well as proponents of world views the Academy needs to know better in order to widen its horizons.

### **Life is people**

To address the resulting anthropological and ethical questions, the Pope, first of all, warns us of the great risk of a reflection on human life that detaches it from experience and reduces it to biology or to an abstract universal, separated from relationships and history. We could say that the term "life" must be redefined, moving from an abstract conception to a “personal” dimension: life is people, men and women, both in the individuality of each person and in the unity of the human family. In this context the correct understanding of the terms relating to “flesh” and to the dynamism of “generation” is particularly important. Flesh indicates the most profound relationship between body and earth, given that all creatures are composed of the same elements.

### **Global bioethics**

The Pope’s Letter then discusses the substance of certain more focused questions. First, he encourages the Academy to participate actively in the dialogue that is inspiring bioethical reflection in the context of globalization (Par. 10-11). It has become imperative that we search for ethical reference points to understand the scope of the ever-new acquisitions made by natural sciences and biotechnologies. Given the intense interaction between different cultures, it is necessary to elaborate universally shared operational criteria that can influence national and international policies. Human rights are in many respects the field on which this confrontation takes place,

because it involves a series of questions shared by all human beings. Tradition has responded through the doctrine of natural law in the search for a universal ethic.

### **“Emergent and convergent Technologies”**

A second front that Francis points out as an area for of commitment is the one that deals with the technologies defined today as “emergent” and “convergent.” (N. 12) These terms refer to nanotechnologies, biotechnologies, information technologies and cognitive sciences. We talk about NBIC (Nano-, Bio-, Information-, Cognitive- technologies). Their appearance in the activities of research institutions and industry accelerates change, expanding the areas where reality can be affected. More drastic measures become available, not only therapeutic ones, but also those designed for the enhancement of living organisms, as well as new organizational procedures, including the transfer to artificial support of functions previously performed by the human body. We are not only faced with new technical tools, but with changes that deeply affect our relationship with the world: new IT devices are hidden with increasing pervasiveness in various areas of reality, including our body, which is increasingly exposed to the dynamics of bio-politics or psycho-politics.

The Academy started working on these issues beginning with its General Assembly last February, which was dedicated to robotics. It intends to take up the question of artificial intelligence next year. In fact, the possibility of intervening on living matter at ever smaller orders of magnitude, of processing ever larger volumes of information, of monitoring-and manipulating-the cerebral processes of cognitive and deliberative activity, has enormous implications: it touches the very threshold of the biological specificity and the spiritual nature of what is human. In this sense it is necessary to keep clearly in mind, and maintain an adequate basis for, the specific difference between human life and other forms of life and autonomous activity.

### **Conclusion**

This time, full of complex and serious challenges, is a blessing. The good news of the Gospel, in fact, can resonate as fullness of life for every woman and every man, for every old man and every child, who lives in this planet. We are called to this mission, sharing our unbridled passion for the truth, the root of all scientific research, with everyone who cares about human life and the common home that is given to them, whatever his beliefs, whatever his history. We do it, we will do it, with the

humility of those who know that this is a service; we do it, we will do it, taking care that our last word is always a word of mercy, the way in which the true life of God is revealed.