

A Presentation of *Humana Communitas*
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore
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Recently, Pope Francis addressed a letter to the Pontifical Academy for Life on the occasion of its twenty-fifth Anniversary. 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 from its beginning to the end of its earthly days, 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," and 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. Following Pope Francis' own commitment "to promote appropriate sinodality at all levels of ecclesial life," we consider these new dimensions of the Statute to be an encouragement to develop, in our own way, a "synodal" approach. In the Pope's exhortation *Christus vivit* the importance and meaning of this concept is emphasized, even encouraging young people to be part of it and to be more and more a driving force in the journey of the whole Church.

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 Academy's objectives have not changed, but precisely to keep them in focus in our activities and initiatives, we need to reinterpret them in light of the innovations that are characteristic of today's world.

The main changes result principally from a hyper-individualist perspective that is affecting and weakening all social relations. Bauman speaks of a "fluid society," a society where the ego prevails over the "us." In a globalized world it is easy-as Todorov would say-for man to find himself "lost," driven to close in on himself, to concentrate on his own interests. In short, between the individual and the human community, "a real schism" (N. 2) seems to have developed, with serious consequences for the "crucial question of the unity of the human family and its future."

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.

Technology has changed from being a positive tool for well-being, to becoming a threat to life, as it feeds risk and uncertainty in society. Thus, it is clear to everyone that the solutions that techno-science (which is now to be considered as a single complex system) proposes, cause equally challenging and complicated problems. We can cite the

following examples: the environmental crisis (today we must defend nature from technology just as technology defended us from nature in the past) and, in the field of medicine, the appearance of diseases (or pathological states) that were unimaginable in the past and are now very delicate (for example, conditions that arise in neonatal intensive care or in vegetative states).

PERSPECTIVES

To address the resulting anthropological and ethical questions, the Pope offers various ideas. First of all, he 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. This is an idea that is very visible in the encyclical *Laudato si'* where the Pope speaks of an elementary truth that is often overlooked or undervalued: "We forget that we ourselves are earth (see Gen 2:7). Our own body is made up of the elements of the planet, its air gives us breath and its water gives us life and renewal." (LS 2).

Starting from our origin from the one Father, "all of us in the universe are united by invisible bonds and we form a sort of universal family." (LS 89). This is why we ourselves are in solidarity with the earth: damage to the ground is like a disease, and the extinction of a species is like mutilation for each of us. It is, moreover, a two-way interaction: "The acceptance of one's body as a gift from God is necessary to welcome and accept the whole world as a gift from the Father and a common home. On the other hand, an attitude of domination over one's own body is transformed into a sometimes

subtle logic of domination over creation. Learning to welcome one's own body, to take care of it and to respect its meanings is essential for a true human ecology.” (LS 155)

This profound bond between earth and body, which is more than just flesh, is also manifested in mutual needs: “All of us created beings need each other.” (LS 42). Need, contrary to what is thought in the wake of neo-Gnosticism (*cf. Gaudete et exultate*, nn. 35-46), already envisions an other, beyond itself, that is, a reality that can complete it, like thirst is to water. “The spark of transcendence is found precisely in the immanence of flesh that needs an other.” (Pagazzi).

The Pope thus evokes the dynamics of generation as a passage through which passive reception is the premise for every subsequent activity, leading to the recognition of being one’s child, welcomed and cared for, even if not always adequately. This is the starting point for the recognition of the social bond that makes us support one another and that, because it is reciprocal, asks us to be responsible for each other: “It seems reasonable to build a bridge between the care that has been received since the beginning of life, and that has enabled it to unfold throughout the course of its development, and care that is to be given to others.” (N. 9).

Naturally, this way of understanding human life, starting from the experience that ties it to relationships, asks, from the beginning, to be appropriately connected to the multiple ways in which bioethics considers the questions of life. It is a task that requires commitment, one that must be further explored and understood. This approach remains a reference not only for the ethical questions that are asked about the beginning and end of life, but also for questions of synthetic biology or about organisms that combine biological tissues and electronic devices.

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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. (Cfr. Commission International Theology, *In Search of a Universal Ethics: A New Look at Natural Law*, Vatican City, 2009).

“Emergent and convergent Technologies”

A second front that Francis points out as an area for 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.¹

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.

Certainly, we must repeat, as Pope Francis did in February, that, “Artificial intelligence, robotics and other technological innovations must be used in a way that serves humanity and contributes to the protection of our common home, instead of doing the opposite, as unfortunately sometimes happens.” The inherent dignity of every human being must be placed without fail at the center of our reflection and action.

The ongoing debate between specialists already shows the serious problems of the governability of algorithms that process huge amounts of data. The March 10 incident involving an Ethiopian Airlines' Boeing 737 Max with 157 souls on board that crashed just six minutes after takeoff, shows the complexity and delicacy of building a world in which man and machine will always have to cooperate more closely. In the same way, technologies for manipulating genetic realities and cerebral functions raise serious ethical questions.

The terms come respectively from Michel Foucault (as control and use of the personal body and the species) and from Byung-Chul Han. The latter believes that in contemporary society the paradigm of “biopolitics” is in decline, in favor of that of “psychopolitics”: power no longer regulates bodies but shapes minds, does not force but seduces, so it does not meet resistance, because each individual has internalized the needs of the system as his own. (see Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics. Neoliberalism and the new techniques of power*, Milan, Nottetempo, 2017).

On the other hand, the knowledge on which emergent and convergent technologies develop offers us great potential for improving the conditions of human life. At the same time, we are seeing extensive criticism of the various forms of reductionism, which attempts to explain the whole of thought, sensitivity, and human psychology on the basis of the totality of their physical and organic components; but this approach does not account for the emergence of the phenomena of experience and consciousness. Consistent with the complexity of the interaction between *psyche* and *techne*, what we learn about brain activity provides new clues to an understanding of conscience (of ourselves and of the world) and the human body itself. It is not possible to ignore the intertwining of multiple relationships among organic components, but neither of those between the body with the environment, if we seek a deeper understanding of the integral human dimension, following the approach that *Laudato si'* promotes when it supports integral ecology.

From the data of the empirical sciences we can get indications that make anthropological reflection possible, in both the philosophical as well as the theological field, as indeed has always been the case. It would indeed be decidedly contrary to the Academy's tradition to continue to use categories linked to the past that do not allow us to interpret today's phenomena or to communicate within today's cultures. It is necessary to enter with wisdom and boldness into their processes, for the purpose of understanding our heritage of faith in a way that is at a level of rationality that is worthy of man. For this reason, it is crucial to participate in dialogue with all so that the development and use of the extraordinary resources that the Pope speaks of is oriented to promoting the dignity of the person and to the most universal good.