XXI Infopoverty World Conference

THE JOURNEY TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE, FAIRER

AND MORE INCLUSIVE DIGITAL SOCIETY

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What struck you most about COP26? And what do you remember about the last G20 or the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit?

Beyond individual programs and documents or decisions, I was touched by the enthusiastic welcome for these gatherings in which world leaders have met to deal with the great challenges that influence our days on this planet.

I am —we are —passionate about this subject because all of us are now well aware that only a global governance can address the problems that affect our civilizations; that we overcome crises either together or not at all; that only together can we continue to inhabit our small planet in a way that is wise and just.

This is why we were pleased at some of the decisions that have been reached. This is why we could not, and did not want to, understand painful absences. This is why we were deeply disappointed by certain outcomes that were clearly deficient.

I believe that our passion, combined with the incredible results achieved in the most diverse fields of knowledge and human activity, has created expectations from, and significant trust in, new digital technologies. Digital transformation, in fact, has allowed us to realize one of the dreams that have always characterized human society—a universal language. We have invented a system to encode (and thus communicate and share) almost all of human experience. Yesterday—simple operations, then—data, texts, images, sounds. Soon after—emotions or pre-conscious neuronal commands. Digitalization has offered a common language, capable of enabling the whole world, the entire human species, to dialogue. This is why we are fascinated by it, and we understand all its possible advantages.

At the same time, digital transformation has a powerful and insidious limitation. If we see more and more frequently the retreat from the exercise of common responsibility, the prevalence of localisms and particularisms, continental and national resistances, it is also because a common digital language, with the possibility of understanding and saying almost everything, opens us to the temptation that everyone says the same thing, that the same language, the same discourse are imposed on everyone.

The powerful universality of digital transformation brings with it the serious risk of a cultural and anthropological homogenization, even more deeply rooted than the biases that infect the extensive data with which we read the present and predict the future. Global governance sees in digitalization one of its most powerful and effective tools, but if we want to produce positive and lasting fruits, we cannot build it by creating a mono-cultural world that erases and eliminates the differences and the infinite manifestations of human history.

"A sustainable, fairer and more inclusive society" can exist only if it is able to preserve differences and make them coexist in peace. Peace is not made by erasing the details, but rather by putting them in respectful dialogue with each other. And here digital transformation, with its incredible ability to record and process details, can be an opportunity not to be wasted. Digitalization, in the search for the common good, must be at the service of what is particular.

Let me give you just one example, as tragic as it is appropriate. According to FAO in the five minutes that I have been speaking, sixty-five people have died of starvation (thirteen every minute), many of them children. An unspeakable infamy! In the recent past, and thanks to the technological development that has widely characterized the agricultural sector in all its aspects, one of the proposed solutions (sometimes heavily promoted) has been to replace local seeds and production methods with other products, sequenced and tested predominantly in Western countries, and chosen for their higher yields and productivity. For the sake of greater short-term effectiveness, the power of digitalization has been put at the service of impoverished and over-simplified uniformity, rather than the development of biodiversity and local production capability. That's not what algorithms are good for.

One of the most famous stories in the Bible (allow me the reference, I am a Catholic priest!) is the one called "the Tower of Babel" in Chapter 11 of the book of Genesis. At the beginning of the story, humanity spoke only one language. This condition generates a centripetal and self-enclosed project: the construction of a single tower, almost a retreat from the earth. God responds to this project by

dispersing humanity and confusing languages: a centrifugal movement that promoted difference and expansion, not uniformity and concentration. God's design is a harmony of multiplicity, not exclusivity that leads to solipsism.

Today we can build towers that reach the skies, thanks in part to our common digital language. I hope our project will protect difference and help us be wise in our dwelling on this planet. If not, we might well tragically share in the curse inflicted on our Biblical forefathers.

Thank you very much.