

Opening speech Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia

February 23, 2023

Dear friends, allow me to call you by this name, which has an evangelical flavor. We meet together in person, we have frequent contact and we are very pleased of it. And I am glad that many guests are connected with us online.

The topic we are addressing in this our General Assembly is part of a set of issues we are hearing more and more about both in academic circles and in the press reaching the public sphere. These are issues that because of their novelty, breadth and scope cannot be resolved with schematic, naively simplistic answers that make use of ready-made categories of thought. The rapid transformations we are experiencing require us first and foremost to consider attentively and willingly these phenomena. The questions emerging from these pressing novelties, and the dramatic contradictions involved in them, demand to be brought into sharp focus. Hence the decision – shared within the new Governing Council – to address the theme of emerging and converging technologies, which after all Pope Francis explicitly mentions in his Letter *Humana communitas*, which he wrote to us for the Academy's 25th anniversary.

In opening the proceedings, it is not my task to propose answers to the questions we will address. But I think it is useful to indicate some guidelines which involve several of the main questions we face today.

Knowledge and responsibility

The first area of discernment concerns the cognitive attitude needed to deal more adequately with the issues related to our topics. Already in the past years we have tried to work in this direction, talking about global bioethics, automatic machines (robots), algorithms (AI) and public health in the time of the pandemic. Pope Francis himself has repeatedly stressed the need to adopt a broad and flexible approach for understanding the new phenomena. The combined effect of their interaction, in fact, is greater than the parts: interconnectedness calls for an approach to the multifaceted complexity of the whole, which urges a decisive progress toward a trans-disciplinary cognitive approach. As a matter of fact, dialogue between disciplines is necessary, but also insufficient: for there are aspects that can be framed, even just phenomenologically, only with a view in which disciplinary tools combine and integrate in the very description of the phenomena that are to be identified.

This attention to the ways in which we learn and know reality, moreover, is not just a theoretical, methodological or epistemological discourse, but has profound ethical relevance. All the more so because the processes of scientific knowledge and developments in technology directly affect the very human faculties of knowing and learning, of feeling and willing, of evaluating and deciding. On how we know also depends the identification of the areas of our responsibility, which continue to expand due to increasingly powerful technologies. Our experience in studying and knowing the phenomena of nature and society, therefore, should not neglect critical reflection on the categories of thought with which we shape them. "Greater interdisciplinary communication" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 204) is as necessary today as ever to avert "a risk that a single scientific advance will be seen as the only possible lens for viewing a particular aspect of life, society and the world. Researchers who are expert in their own field, yet also familiar with the findings of other sciences and disciplines, are in a position to discern other aspects of the object of their study and thus to become open to a more comprehensive and integral knowledge of reality" (*ibid.*). To give an example that relates to the issues we are dealing with, think of the different ways of understanding illness and health. They depend on the kind of science we use: if we neglect the environment, society, economics and culture, we will be pushed to give only medical or biological answers. But the pandemic has taught us how inadequate that perspective is. That is why it has also been referred to as a "syndemic": to show the multiplicity of dimensions – not just physical ones – that came into play in the spread of the contagion. The determinants of health (and disease) require a far more nuanced approach to be effectively understood and responsibly managed.

Emerging and converging technologies challenge our mindsets and the way our knowledge is structured. They first of all bring out the connection between knowledge and different kinds of technologies. But, at a more fundamental level, they highlight with particular force the mutual interaction between human beings and the environment: every change in one acts on the others, so they always evolve together. Therefore, transforming the environment in its many natural, cultural, technological dimensions also always means transforming ourselves. We need to consider these aspects more carefully to better take into account the complexity of phenomena and avoid abstract classifications between personal and artificial, between human and technological, between different living forms in the biosphere. Only in this way will we be able to adopt an approach that will allow us to understand and develop a relationship with machines that does not follow the logic of man being replaced by machine, but rather that of effective cooperation in the sign of what is human.

A similar relationship of mutual implication also applies to the question that guides the reflection of these days, recalled in the title of our Workshop by the reference to the "common good". That is, the relationship between the individual and the community. Hence, here too we need to overcome any dualistic approach: we need to avoid a perspective that pits general interest and individual rights against each other, as if the promotion of one is at the expense of the others. Rather, the way is to think and promote them together, with the understanding that they are mutually supportive. This is true not only in terms of quality of care and effectiveness of health care systems, but also in the very practice of informed consent, which cannot be considered only as an expression of the individual's freedom, but also of the social bond. This unbreakable link implies the careful evaluation of the practical conditions of an intersubjective nature, which define, on the one hand, the actual – and emotional – world of the individual; and on the other hand call into question the ethical and supportive responsibility of the civil community.

After all, health itself is evermore one of the fundamental common goods that no one can safeguard alone. Indeed, it requires a shared commitment to be promoted and protected. It is therefore a matter of developing a concept of the common good that does not reduce it to the sum of individual interests (in the utilitarian sense), but conceives it as a condition in which everyone, no one excluded, can realize themselves. That is, an understanding that is based on reciprocity in not only interpersonal relations, but also in the relations of each person toward society, as the locus of coexistence in solidarity. Without this constitutive reference to the common good, that heritage of trust that underlies all human coexistence and all forms of "social friendship" will be undermined - as explained in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (cf. *FT*, no. 168) - and the scientific world is also called to contribute to that legacy of trust.

Within this framework also arises the issue of the safety of devices produced by new technologies. What has already been said about the complexity of their interactions and the impossibility of properly predicting and controlling their effects, especially in the long term, introduces an uncertainty that requires particular caution. We know that these devices often enter everyday life without proper evaluation, as is the case with medicines and medical equipment, which undergo stringent scrutiny before being approved.

The contribution of religious experience and theological reflection

The third series of questions regards the contribution that we as believers can give to the debate on these issues. Religious experience in the Christian context opens before us a horizon of meaning that

combines human transcendence (i.e., creation) and divine immanence (incarnation): the former (creation) reminds us that our origin precedes us and our destination goes beyond the boundary of time; the latter (incarnation) reveals to us that the Lord Jesus assumes and redeems the whole of the human condition. Within this framework we are called to contribute conceptual mediation without being afraid to make use of the resources of contemporary knowledge, including philosophy, both to deepen our understanding of the fundamental experiences that are common to all human beings and to make communicable and transmissible the sources of meaning that revelation and tradition offer us.

We need to find a balance in the tension between two different polarities: on the one hand, the scientific and technological logic that understands the world as a reservoir of available materials; on the other, the desire to recognize the world as a spontaneous gift, as a bearer of life and meaning. This is a tension that affects all the paths and stages of life, from birth to death.

The openness of religious consciousness to transcendence will be able to develop a stimulus that nurtures trust in God's creative act on behalf of His creation. The legitimate need to experiment with new possibilities in no way justifies technologies that are either detrimental to the dignity of human beings or geared toward the delirious design of their complete control. Finding ways to protect the former and curb the latter is the task of human research worthy of the name, carried out with rigor and intellectual honesty.

As believers we are also called to a wholly special vigilance over the drama of the use of new technologies placed at the service of ever larger and more sophisticated destructive operations. What is taking place on several war fronts reminds us of this with increasing force. Even the sad occasion of the first anniversary of the war in Ukraine reminds us that we cannot be content with denouncing the horrors of this conflict and other conflicts; we are called to do everything in our power to stop their continuation and to avert their premise. I do not intend to go into the distinctions between legitimate defense and war (illegitimate because it is always unjust) here. I only wish to point out how the availability of increasingly sophisticated armaments leads us to the paradoxical temptation to deal with conflict by increasing violence: this a path that at first glance sometimes seems easier than the search for alternative solutions. But as Pope Francis has told us, "Using weapons to resolve conflicts is a sign of weakness and fragility. Negotiation, mediation and conciliation require courage" (Audience with members of the NGO "Leader pour la Paix," 2.12.2022). We must overcome the sort of mental laziness that hinders the search for alternative ways of self-defense and conflict resolution, that seek to speak to the conscience of the enemy and not to put him down with violence that compels him only from the outside. This attitude requires long preparation and the adoption of a clever cross-cutting approach to complexity, able to identify the

weakness of instinctual simplifications and to avoid the dead ends of perception. Truly creative knowledge should not be used only to upgrade cell phones.

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