

The Pontifical Academy for Life and the centrality of man

by

Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia - President of the Pontifical Academy for Life

I am pleased to offer to this study seminar the proposals of the Pontifical Academy for Life to defend and promote life in the context of the change of epoch we are all living through. The Pontifical Academy for Life is a body of the Holy See composed of experts from different disciplines, called to reflect precisely on everything related to the great theme of life. Lately, Pope Francis has wanted scholars from different religious traditions to be part of it, because the theme of life increasingly involves the entire human community. Indeed, in the last decades, the world has changed at an ever-increasing speed, especially in the area of technology. The speed of technological development is far greater than that of other sciences such as philosophy, law, theology... In my opinion, religions - all religions, but particularly the Abrahamic ones -, are called to deal with this new world in order to give that contribution of wisdom that can save humanity from falling into the abyss.

The first challenge facing religions is "hyper-individualism" that is disrupting all social relationships, fragmenting and weakening them. The great sociologist Zygmunt Bauman defined contemporary society as a "liquid society" in which the "I" is increasingly prevailing over the "we": self-interest grows as interest in society wanes. Everyone is driven to withdraw into themselves, to close up within the horizons of their own narrow interests. We live at a time in history when passion for what is human, for all humanity, is in trouble. The mutual distrust of individuals and peoples is fed by the unrestrained pursuit of self-interest and thus also competition. In short, a real "schism" is taking place between the individual and the human community. The word "we" now seems to have definitely fallen apart. The encyclical *Laudato si'* - among its many meanings - shows the state of emergency in which mankind's relationship with the history of the earth and peoples finds itself. This is an alarm clearly related to the little attention given to the great and crucial question of the unity of the human family and its future. The erosion of this sensitivity, due to worldly forces of conflict and war, is growing worldwide and seems unstoppable. The result is the emergence of a veritable culture - indeed, we should call it an anti-culture - hostile to the values of universal humanism and allied with the arrogance of money.

And there emerges a paradox: how could it happen that economy and technology caused our most bitter divisions and our worst nightmares, at the very moment in world history when economy and technology would enable us to take good care of the common home and the human family, thus fulfilling God's mandate? This is due to the lack of vision. We are all closed in on ourselves. And it is mainly money and technology that select our needs and manipulate our dreams.

It is time for a new vision aimed at promoting a humanism of fraternity and solidarity between individuals and peoples.

We Christians know that the faith and love necessary for this covenant draw their strength from the mystery of the redemption of Jesus Christ. And we also know that the conscience and affection of the human creature are by no means impermeable, nor insensitive, to the faith and works of this universal brotherhood, sown by the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. We must put universal brotherhood back in the spotlight, at all costs! For it is one thing to feel compelled to live together; it is quite another thing to choose fraternity as the heart and engine of human existence. Along these lines, there is a first consideration I would like to submit to you: the fundamental relational nature of man.

Human fraternity

The greatest danger we need to be aware of when talking about human life is to think of it as something detached from experience, reducing it to a biological concept or a universal abstract, unrelated to relationships and history. The word "life" must be understood again by moving from an abstract conception to a "personal" dimension: life is people, men and women, both in the individuality of each and in the unity of the human family. In this horizon, the re-use of terminology related to "flesh" and the dynamics of "generation" acquires particular value. Flesh and generation are two key words. Flesh is the deepest place of familiarity between body and earth, whereby all creatures share the same elements they are made of. A deeper understanding of the biblical account of the creation of man and woman makes us realize the wealth of wisdom contained in those pages. This is not the place to delve into it. I just want to point out that corporeality is one of the central dimensions of the faith of the three Abrahamic religions: man, every man, is created by God, is the son of God, in the wholeness of his body and spirit.

In the words of Pope Francis in the encyclical *Laudato si'*, "as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family" (LS 89). That is why we are in solidarity with the earth: that is why "we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement" (cf. *ibid.*). This is, after all, a two-way process: "The acceptance of our bodies as God's gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology" (LS 155).

This deep connection between earth and body, which goes beyond the flesh, is also manifested in the reciprocity of need. Pope Francis again, "all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another" (*LS 42*). Need, contrary to what is thought in the wake of the new variants of Gnosticism (*cf. Gaudete et exultate, nos. 35-46*), already refers to something else, beyond itself, that is, to that reality that can correspond to it, as thirst refers to water. In short, the first glimpse of transcendence lies in the immanence of our flesh in need of support and help.

The word "generation" is equally important. Pope Francis understands the dynamic of "generation" as the passage through which passively receiving constitutes the premise for all subsequent activity. All of us have been generated. No one is self-generated. This is the meaning of passively receiving life, and thus recognizing that we are children, welcomed and cared for, even though it may happen inadequately. This consciousness is the starting point for recognizing the social bond that makes us supportive and responsible for one another: therefore, it seems reasonable to create a link between the care received from the beginning of our life, which has allowed life to fully develop, and the care we must provide to others with responsibility. In summary, each of us must say, "I am me because of you." Human beings are fundamentally relational. This shatters the absolutism of the autonomous and independent individual.

This way of understanding human life, starting from the experience that refers back to our original relations, should be properly connected to the many ways in which technology affects life. And here I would like to turn to a second point that concerns the relationship between technology and the frontiers of life.

"Emerging and Converging Technologies"

The front of emerging and converging technologies is delicate. By emerging and converging technologies we mean four branches of science: nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science. Their advent into the processes of research and industry is increasing the spaces for human intervention to an astonishing degree. With them – and especially with their interaction – increasingly impactful actions become available, not only therapeutic actions, but also the possibility of increasing the potentialities of living organisms, as well as new organizational procedures for work or health care, up to the transfer of functions, hitherto performed by the human body, to artificial supports. These are not only new technical tools, but changes that affect in depth our relationship with the world. The last General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, held in recent days, regarded these issues in particular. These are the terms of the question: the possibility of intervening on human beings in a predominant way, the processing of ever larger volumes of information and data, the monitoring – and manipulation – of the brain processes of

cognitive and deliberative activity, has enormous implications since it touches on the very threshold of the biological specificity and spiritual difference of what is human.

We have now entered the third wave that characterizes the epochal change we have been experiencing. Epochal change means that for the first time in human history, men have the capacity to destroy themselves and the world. This capacity for total destruction has been possible since the nuclear bomb was created. This destructive capacity is also possible through the destruction of the environment. And here's the third possibility: that of manipulating the human being with new technologies. For the past two decades we have been hearing about post-humanism, trans-humanism, enhanced humanity, and so on.

In the face of this literally apocalyptic scenario we have the responsibility to maintain a clear distinction between human life and other forms of life and autonomous activity. Regarding Artificial Intelligence, for example, Pope Francis rightly noted that "artificial intelligence, robotics and other technological innovations must be so employed that they contribute to the service of humanity and to the protection of our common home rather than to the contrary, as some assessments unfortunately foresee." The inherent dignity of every human being must be firmly placed at the center of our reflection and action. The ongoing debate among specialists themselves already shows the serious problems of governability of algorithms that process huge amounts of data. Likewise, the technologies for the manipulation of genetic makeup and brain functions also pose serious ethical questions.

On the other hand, the knowledge that made it possible to develop emerging and converging technologies offers plenty of potential for improving the conditions of human life. These technologies are an effective and valuable development in helping humans live better, opening up extraordinary opportunities – that were unimaginable just a few years ago – for the treatment of diseases and for improved social interactions. At the same time, however, there is widespread criticism of the various forms of reductionism. In any case, the attempt to explain the whole of human thought, sensitivity, and psychism on the basis of the functional sum of its physical and organic parts, does not account for the emergence of the phenomena of experience and consciousness. In the very complex interaction between *psyche* and *techne*, what we learn about brain activity provides new clues about the way of understanding consciousness and the human body itself: it is not possible to disregard the elaborate network of multi-faceted relationships between the organic components, but also the connection between the body and the environment, for a deeper understanding of the integral human dimension, according to the approach that *Laudato si'* promotes by advocating integral ecology.

In this context, the call for ethics, that is, the centrality of the human person and the human family, is crucial. Religions play a particularly important role here, precisely because – starting from

the three Abrahamic religions – they propose the centrality of man and the human family for any real development. We have even coined a new term: faced with the risk of a real dictatorship of the algorithm – we could call it *algocracy* – Pope Francis has come up with another word, *algor-ethics*, in order to bend technology to man, not vice versa. The aim is to underline the limits of technological and scientific development -particularly in its radical invasive and irreversible forms. The risk is that the yearning for perfection may make one forget the natural limitation of man, who forgets himself by “playing God”. A reflection is crucial that puts back on the table the question of the limits of modification of man and human nature in the light of the defense of human dignity (against reductionism), physical and psychic integrity, protection of the authenticity of what is human, security and privacy, freedom against technological pervasiveness, the possibility of personal development under conditions of social and global justice with equitable distribution and fair access, and both social and environmental sustainability. In this horizon of thought what is increasingly urgent is the formulation and implementation of new rights for humans in the era of emerging technologies, which can establish the boundaries of technological advancement.