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THE CHALLENGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCES

Indian Bishops Conference

Bangalore 2024

Introduction

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, dear friends,

I accepted your invitation with great joy and interest and I wish to express my heartfelt thanks for this listening and sharing opportunity. I wish to thank you also more specifically for the topic you have proposed. In spite of the fact that the Pontifical Academy for Life has been working for several years on the relationship between the new technologies and human life, it is the first time that an Episcopal Conference has specifically addressed this topic to explore what it means to be a believer in this technological age, full of challenges, and, at least at this very moment, fraught with concerns.

Thank you for your invite and foresight, which I hope I can contribute to by offering some insights that may be useful to the Indian churches.

The revolution in progress

The advent of artificial intelligence systems (the plural may seem redundant, but it actually describes the too often overlooked complexity of this phenomenon) is nothing new. In fact, these technologies have been studied for more than 50 years. What has recently happened, is that the technological capacity attained (computing power and data availability) is such that the valuable algorithms we have developed over the decades can now be put to good use. The advent then of Chat GPT and the public availability of some fairly reliable generative AI systems have made this the ultimate issue of 2023. Everybody is talking and wondering about it.

The transformation brought about by the advent of AI promises to be historic. In fact, similarly to the introduction of electricity, for example, it will not only impact on one or a few aspects of human life, but on everybody, without exception, constituting a driver of change in the lives of individuals and the social forms they are a part of, including the Church. A general, fast, pervasive change, which is part of the broader digital transformation, almost a universal language, that has

marked the last decades. A few weeks ago. Aaron Purie, Editor in Chief of India Today, called it the "2.0 version of the Copernican Revolution"'.

The incredible possible good

At this moment, quite a few have started enumerating, in worried if not apocalyptic tones, the many dangers that this change seems to bring to human life, to the point of even postulating the end of human civilisation on this planet, destined to be replaced, thanks to reckless hybridisation, by a cold civilisation of machines.

But this is not what I want to talk to you about today. I would rather like to draw your attention first of all to the incredible benefits that the new technologies, and AI systems in particular, are already bringing to our history.

In the field of health care, diagnostics has been dramatically enhanced by these systems capable of detecting or predicting diseases practically invisible to the human eye. Developments have been recorded in laboratories and in medical education, where digital modelling has made giant steps forward in the training of future doctors.

There are also countless applications of AI in the world of agriculture, especially in those areas not yet exploited with intensive and often destructive practices. Today, small farming villages have at their disposal, by means of low-cost smartphones, accurate weather forecasts, systems for optimising farming and trading, and effective tools to manage resources and raw materials.

Finally, if we look at the world of communication and information management, we cannot but be amazed at the ease we have in sharing content, getting hold of accurate data, reading documents in other languages.

Broadening our perspective, the incredible opportunities afforded by the digital technologies are undeniable. Just imagine what the recent pandemic might have been without digital communication platforms and without the biological labs where an unknown virus was sequenced in three months and a vaccine developed in nine.

Yet worry and fear often prevail in the general debate and, before that, in the perception of the transformation in progress. In some ways, this is a structural phenomenon: it is indeed very informative to read the apocalyptic articles that were published when the first electrical systems were introduced. The extreme speed of the current phenomenon further exacerbates the strain that marks any systemic adjustment of society. There is, however, something deeper, which deserves our attention as pastors.

Social forms in the digital age

First of all, we must acknowledge that the internet and the digital technologies are radically changing social structures. I do not have the time to illustrate these processes in detail. I only mention them because of the impact that these transformations also have on church life.

The Internet, at least on a superficial level, replaces a pyramidal view of society with a horizontal and equal one. Truth is no longer the prerogative of established and recognised authorities, but is the fruit of a continuous dialogic quest involving a thousand voices. The social media allow individuals to play a protagonist role (with special attention to women and people living in rural areas) in a manner hitherto unimaginable (and perhaps even undesirable for some). Last October, these issues were addressed at length with the 450 young leaders gathered in Guwahati by the Indian Catholic Youth Movement.

Allow me to make two observations:

1. the first is sociological. We often associate the digital transformation with the world of youth, with a fracture in the transmission of knowledge and faith between generations, with easy access to immoral experiences. This is true but partial: the largest consumers of online porn in India are adults between the ages of 25 and 34 (husbands and fathers of children, or rather husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, since 33% of users are women). Online Indian gamers are also 59% adults aged between 25 and 44. Beware of reducing this to a youth issue, even though this "toxic" exposure on the young and very young can have even more disruptive effects.

2. The second is more theological. The passage from authority to authoritativeness, from instruction to testimony (what else are influencers?), from verticality to synodality, are all passages that return (or at least allude) to evangelical dynamisms. Why consider them only in their destructive implications?

The anthropological issue

Turning to the specific topic of AI, I wish first of all to draw your attention to a fundamental issue raised by this technological innovation. The debate is often marked by an ongoing defensive thinking aimed at pointing at the difference between humans and machines, always from a negative perspective: machines lack this and that, they are not capable of doing a whole series of things that we associate with human originality. By being uniquely concerned with differences, we run the risk of overlooking the real question: what can we say about ourselves in the 21st

technological and global century? The question is broad and challenging. That is why we have made this question central to of the annual workshop of the Pontifical Academy for Life that we will celebrate in 15 days' time in Rome. The meeting, opened by Pope Francis and broadcast online, will have among its speakers Prof. Antony Devasia from the University of Delhi, and will see the participation of the five Indian members of the Academy.

There are two limiting perspectives that the current debate on AI seems to impose on our reflections on what is human.

1. The reason why we are worried about these systems is that they emulate certain processes that we associate with human intelligence. And this is why we try to mark the difference between us and them, as if our humanity were to reside in this faculty. This is not true: we are not our intelligence alone, and any discourse that goes in this direction is reductive.

2. We also are not our data alone. Dataism (a pseudo-religious form that springs from the incredible predictive power of machine learning systems) wishes to reduce us to the (innumerable) traces we leave behind.

AI systems, seen from the perspective of their direst anthropological challenge, require us to return to talking about humans and their bodies. The urgent topic is the flesh, and, if you please, we are experts in this matter. We are rooted in the event of the incarnation of the Son of God, in a resurrected body that St Thomas (the evangeliser of India) wishes to be able to touch, in the promise of the resurrection of the flesh that we proclaim in the Apostles' Creed.

Preserving the flesh is among the urgent tasks of Christians in this digital age. A proclamation, that of the irrepressibility of bodies, which must be passionate, almost carnal. Or, as Cardinal Neri said last December in Goa at the SIGNIS national meeting: 'the truth with heart'.

Necessary responsibility

A more optimistic view of the AI phenomenon, which I hope I have conveyed to you with my words, certainly does not spare us from the need to regulate and give direction to such a powerful and cross-cutting matter. This is a concern that has fortunately grown at the global level, albeit at different times and in different ways. Recently, even the United Nations have set up a group of experts on this topic, of which one of our academics is a member. The messages of Pope Francis on peace and AI, and in the days to come on the impact of this technology on communication, also testify to this urgency.

We have become aware of all this for some years now, also thanks to the dialogue with so many actors involved in this development. Suffice it to recall one of the most outstanding among such encounters: with the President of Microsoft, Brad Smith, who asked us to support their work through a prolonged and ongoing ethical reflection.

In 2020, just before the outbreak of the pandemic, the Academy organised a scientific congress on this subject and proposed a document, the Rome Call for AI Ethics, which set out some essential regulatory principles and framed them within a basic anthropological horizon: ethics, law, education (you will find more information in the flyer that has been handed out). The document was signed by Smith himself, by the Vice-president of IBM, by Qu Donyu, Director General of FAO, and by the Italian government.

Since then, dozens of universities and organisations have signed this Call to Responsibility.

The Call advocates an ethical approach by design. Let me expand on this. The question of the ethics of AI is often raised at the end: we possess a great technology and we need to decide whether to use it well or badly. The question is true but it is not enough, because, if put this way, it appears to say that technologies are neutral and everything depends on the uses to which they are put. This is not true. It is naive to think of technologies as neutral. They, like any other human endeavour, bring with them cultures, social constructs, intentions, ways of understanding the economy and humanity. The ethical question must be asked at the outset, by design: how do we want to design, realise, and market these incredible technologies?

We are also aware that there may be articulate and complex answers to this ethical question, not necessarily always unambiguous and simple. We are called upon to regulate an extremely fast-growing and global phenomenon by bringing together very different cultures and traditions. It cannot but make us reflect that AI is made with Chinese and African minerals, Western ideas and Indian CEOs.

Paradoxically, however, this global experience raises a question about the social dimension of the phenomenon, shifting the focus from the technologies and their benefits – as endowed with an undeniable power of fascination (which, moreover, is what the Bible tells us about idols) – to design and production methods. What is frightening is not the technologies as such, but the oligopoly situation – the concentration of enormous power in the hands of a few, moreover in the absence of any democratic representation – underlying their design and marketing. These are in the hands of corporations that are often more powerful than individual States, and that have

sometimes adopted a predatory attitude towards users and their data. Here too, regulation is necessary.

Safeguarding the future

Precisely in light of this global call to responsibility, the Academy and the Holy See wished to also involve the leaders of other religions. In January 2022, Jews and Muslims signed the Rome Call. Next July in Hiroshima, the leaders of Asian religions will also sign it. I hope to be soon able to bring you the agenda for this event, which testifies to the global responsibility of religions, called upon not to defend themselves in an apparently hostile environment, but to serve humankind in every time and place.

Dear friends, the great transformations which are taking place should not frighten us. They are rather a call to the responsibility that the Gospel demands of us towards the human life inhabiting this planet. The memory of the Easter of Jesus makes us women and men who take responsibility for the future.

This is what Pope Francis is reminding us of when he states that "Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire."

Note on Pontifical Theological Institute John Paul II for marriage and Family Sciences

Allow me, however, to add a small appendix to these reflections. Besides being President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, I am also Grand Chancellor of the Pontifical Theological Institute "John Paul II" for Marriage and the Family Sciences.

Just yesterday, I visited the Indian branch of this institute based in Changanacherry, where I inaugurated a two-day working session involving the family pastoral leaders of all the dioceses in Kerala.

I wish to thank those of you who are investing people and resources in this project and I invite everybody to consider this institution when planning for the training of those entrusted with the task of accompanying the families of your churches.

Pope Francis decided to refound this institution to place the family at the centre of the Church, broadening its perspective. Indeed, it is no longer possible to reduce the family to a moral issue. To talk about the family today means to talk about social ties, attention to the weak (children and the elderly), and also about the form of the Church, which is called to be more family-like. I wish to invite you to look at the material provided by the Vice-Chancellor, who should have been here with me today, but who is involved in this course and therefore could not attend.

Thank you