Pope on AI: Decisions affecting human life must never be delegated

Addressing participants in a meeting dedicated to AI, Pope Leo stresses the importance of keeping the human person at the heart of this technology to avoid the danger of threatening the common good and reducing people to data points.



By Kielce Gussie, Varican News

Speaking to the participants of the meeting, “The Future of AI: A Dialogue Between the Vatican and the Scientific World on the Developments and Applications of Intelligent Technologies”, Pope Leo XIV pointed out that coming from different countries brings new questions and perspectives.

Nevertheless, “you share a certain sense of unease regarding the development of artificial intelligence. We recognize the direction we should take, yet not enough is being done to move forward,” he argued.

The group’s concerns, ideas, and suggestions for the future are the “first fruits of a transdisciplinary approach”, which is more and more needed in order to address the complex challenges of the day.

Words that continue to ring true

The Pope highlighted that the Pontifical Academy for Life and the Future of Life Institute, who jointly organized this meeting, are “well aware of the challenges that arise wherever human dignity is threatened.”

With this in mind, he recalled Pope Francis’ words to the G7 leaders in 2024, where he described AI “an exciting and fearsome tool” and stressed that no machine should ever be able to choose whether to take human life.

These words still ring true, the Pope said. Turning to his own encyclical Magnifica Humanitas, Pope Leo outlined five considerations regarding artificial intelligence: the future of AI is not pre-determined; machines are tools, not people; certain decisions cannot ever be delegated; intelligent technologies must be directed to the common good; and institutions are needed to put ethical principles into practice to guide AI development.

What is AI's purpose?

The future of artificial intelligence is not pre-determined. Since human beings develop AI, its future relies on the choices humanity makes. That is why, the Pope stressed, "we have the responsibility to guide, change, and, when necessary, reject its applications."

Therefore, the question is not just, "What can AI do?" Instead, it needs to be, "What purpose should it serve?"

Developing AI should not mean focusing solely on the finish line and ignoring those left behind. Pope Leo argued that a reliable system that serves the human person has much greater value than one that is powerful but whose "consequences cannot be adequately foreseen or controlled."

No replacing human beings

The second consideration the Pope explained is that machines are tools and not persons. They do not have experiences, bodies, feelings, relationships, and do not understand love, work, or responsibility.

Some have suggested giving these systems rights or legal personhood. However, Pope Leo underlined how this risks "obscuring human responsibility and leaving those who suffer harm to confront a faceless entity."

Thirdly, there are certain decisions that should never be given to machines. For example, putting a person on a target list or in a border control database means they will become simply a data point.

"Decisions affecting human life, freedom and the use of force must always remain subject to effective, informed, and responsible human oversight," the Pope explained. That is why AI must be "disarmed". Furthermore, he encouraged the States meeting in Geneva in November to take steps to ban lethal autonomous weapons.

What we need today

The fourth consideration is that intelligent technologies should be geared towards the common good. "Indeed, they must never become ends in themselves or serve merely the interests of a privileged few," the Pope stressed to the participants.

These technologies should encourage solidarity and participation at different levels of the global community, making sure the benefits of progress are enjoyed equally.

Pope Leo's final consideration is a challenge, which he described as potentially the most urgent. The world needs institutions capable of putting ethical principles into practice to guide AI into practice and a focus on protecting the common good.

What this calls for is "shared standards, independent oversight, and clear mechanisms of accountability, so that decisions concerning the development and use of AI can be examined, challenged when necessary, and accompanied by appropriate remedies for any harm caused."

Pope Leo closed his address to the meeting participants expressing his gratitude for their contributions in the field of AI and encouraging them to persevere, and work together with a spirit of dialogue and shared responsibility directed to the common good.

"I accompany you with my prayers, and to each of you I cordially impart my blessing."