

Human. Meanings and Challenges

12 February 2024

Address to the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life

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Pope Francis

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I greet Archbishop Paglia, Your Excellencies, Your Eminence and the new Archbishop of Santiago de Chile, and I thank you for your commitment to advancing research in the areas of the life sciences, health and healing, a commitment that has marked the work of the Pontifical Academy for Life for these thirty years of its existence.

The question that you are addressing in this General Assembly is one of utmost importance, namely, how we are to understand what is distinctive about the human being. It is a question that is ancient and yet always new, one that the remarkable resources made available by new technologies is posing to us in ever more complex ways. Scholars have always made it clear that one cannot take a stand, a priori, either 'for' or 'against' machines and technologies; in terms of our human experience, such an antithesis proves meaningless. Today too, an appeal to the distinction between natural and artificial processes, viewing the former as authentically human and the latter as foreign or even contrary to what is human, proves similarly inadequate. It does not work. What is needed, instead, is to situate scientific and technological knowledge within a broader horizon of meaning, and thus to avert the hegemony of a technocratic paradigm (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 108).

Let us take, for example, the attempt to reproduce the human being by the means and methods provided by technology. Such an approach entails the reduction of the human being to an aggregate of reproducible performances based on a digital language which presumes that every type of information can be expressed using numerical codes. The obvious parallel to the biblical story of the Tower of Babel (cf. Gen 11:1-9) shows how the desire to create a single language is deeply rooted in the history of humanity. God's intervention, often all too hastily written off as mere punishment, can instead be seen in positive terms as a kind of blessing, as an attempt to counter the drift towards a 'pensée unique' through a proliferation of human languages. In this way, human beings would come face to face with their limitations and vulnerability, and be challenged to respect differences and to show concern for one another.

To be sure, the increased capabilities of science and technology can lead human beings to see themselves as engaged in a creative act akin to that of God, producing an image and likeness of human life, including the capacity for language with which "talking machines" appear to be endowed. Would it then be within human power to infuse spirit into inanimate matter? The temptation is insidious. What is being asked of us is to discern how the creativity entrusted to human beings can be exercised responsibly. In other words, how can we invest the talents we have received while preventing the disfigurement of what is human and the cancellation of the constitutive differences that give order to the cosmos (cf. Gen 1-3).

The principal task, then, is an anthropological one: we are challenged to develop a culture that, by integrating the resources of science and technology, is capable of acknowledging and promoting the human being in his or her irreducible specificity. There is a need to explore whether this specificity is to be found even upstream of language, within the sphere of pathos and emotions, desire and intentionality, which only human beings can perceive, appreciate and convert into positive and beneficial relationships with others, aided by the grace of the Creator. This is ultimately a cultural task, since culture shapes and directs the spontaneous forces of life and social mores.

Dear friends, the topic you are addressing is indeed challenging, as are the two ways in which you intend to approach it. I realize, first, that you are working to bring about an effective dialogue, a cross-disciplinary exchange, in the form that *Veritatis Gaudium* describes as "situating and stimulating all disciplines against the backdrop of the light and life offered by the Wisdom streaming from God's revelation" (No. 4c). I also appreciate the fact that your reflection is being conducted, as it were, in an authentic "cultural laboratory in which the Church carries out the performative interpretation of the reality brought about by the Christ event, and is nourished by the gifts of wisdom and knowledge by which the Holy Spirit enriches the People of God" (*ibid.*, 3). I can only encourage this kind of dialogue, which allows each person to offer his or her own reflections while interacting with others in a mutual exchange of views. This is the way to overcome the mere juxtaposition of disciplines and to undertake a revision of our knowledge through reciprocal listening and critical reflection.

Secondly, in the way your discussions are planned, we can see a synodal method of proceeding, suitably

adapted to address those topics central to the Academy's mission. This process is demanding, since it involves careful attention and freedom of spirit, and readiness to set out on unexplored and unknown paths, free of useless attempts to "look back". For those committed to a serious and evangelical renewal of thought, it is essential to call into question even settled opinions and assumptions that have not been critically examined.

In this regard, Christianity has always offered significant contributions, absorbing meaningful elements from every culture where it has taken root and reinterpreting them in the light of Christ and the Gospel, appropriating the linguistic and conceptual resources present in various cultural settings. This is a lengthy and ongoing process demanding an intellectual approach capable of embracing numerous generations; it can be compared to the wisdom and vision of those who plant trees knowing that their fruit will be consumed by their children, or those who build cathedrals knowing that they will be completed by future generations.

It is this same attitude, open and responsible, and docile to the Spirit who, like the wind, blows where it wills (cf. Jn 3:8), which I ask the Lord to grant to all of you. I offer you my prayerful good wishes that your deliberations will prove enriching and fruitful. I cordially bless you and I ask you, please, to remember me in your prayers. Thank you!