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Audience with members of the Pontifical Academy for Life

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Pontifical Academy for Life, on the occasion of the 28th General Assembly, taking place in the Vatican from 20 to 22 February, on the theme "Converging on the person. Emerging Technologies for the Common Good".

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father Francis to those present at the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear brothers and sisters,

Mr. Cardinal, dear Bishops

I welcome you warmly! I thank Archbishop Paglia for the words he addressed to me, and all of you for the commitment you dedicate to the promotion of human life. Thank you! In these days you will reflect on the relationship between the person, emerging technologies and the common good: it is a delicate frontier, where progress, ethics and society meet, and where faith, in its perennial relevance, can make a valuable contribution. In this sense, the Church never ceases to encourage the progress of science and technology at the service of the dignity of the person and for an "integral and integrating" human development.[1] In the letter I addressed to you on the occasion of the twenty-fifth year of the founding of the Academy, I invited you to explore this very theme;[2] now I would like to reflect with you on three challenges that I consider important in this regard: the changing conditions of human life in the technological world; the impact of the new technologies on the very definition of "man" and "relationship", with particular reference to the condition of the most vulnerable; and the concept of "knowledge" and the consequences that derive from it.

The first challenge: the change in the conditions of life of humanity in the world of technology. We know that it is proper for humanity to act in the world in a technological way, transforming the environment and improving the conditions of life. Benedict XVI recalled this, affirming that technology "touches the heart of the vocation of human labour" and that "in technology, seen as the project of his genius, man recognizes himself and forges his own humanity".[3] It therefore helps us to understand ever better the value and the potential of human intelligence, and at the same time it speaks to us of the great responsibility we have towards creation.

In the past, the connection between cultures, social activities and the environment, thanks to less dense interactions with slower effects, was less impactful. Today, instead, the rapid development of technical means makes the interdependence between man and the "common home" more intense and evident, as Saint Paul VI already recognized in *Populorum Progressio*.[4] On the contrary, the force and acceleration of interventions is such as to produce significant mutations - because there is a geometric acceleration, not a mathematical one -, both in the environment and in human living conditions, with effects and developments that are not always clear and predictable. This is being demonstrated by various crises, from the pandemic to the energy crisis, from the climate crisis to the migratory crisis, the consequences of which affect one another, amplifying each other. Sound technological development cannot fail to take into account these complex intersections.

Second challenge: the impact of the new technologies on the definition of "man" and "relationship", especially with regard to the condition of the most vulnerable people. It is clear that the technological form of human experience is becoming more pervasive every day: in the distinctions between "natural" and "artificial", "biological" and "technological", the criteria for discerning what is proper to the human and the technological are becoming increasingly difficult. In particular, the importance of the concept of personal consciousness as relational experience, which cannot be separated from corporeality or culture, must be decisively reaffirmed. In other words, in the network of relationships, both subjective and community, technology cannot supplant human contact, the virtual cannot substitute the real, and the social networks cannot replace the social environment. And we are tempted to let the virtual prevail over the real: this is an ugly temptation.

Even within processes of scientific research, the relationship between the person and the community indicates increasingly complex ethical turning implications. For example, in the field of healthcare, where the quality of information and the assistance of the individual depends largely on the collection and study of available data. Here the problem of reconciling the confidentiality of personal data with the sharing of information that affects the interest of all must be addressed. Indeed, it would be selfish to ask to be treated with the best resources and skills available to society without contributing to increasing them. More generally, I think that the urgency that the distribution of resources and access to treatment should be to the benefit of all, so that inequalities are reduced and the necessary support is guaranteed to the most fragile, such as the disabled, the sick and the poor.

It is therefore necessary to be vigilant about the speed of transformations, the interaction between changes and the possibility of guaranteeing an overall balance. Moreover, this balance is not necessarily the same in different cultures, as instead the technological view would appear to presume when it imposes itself as a universal and homogeneous language and culture – this is a mistake. Instead, efforts must be made to ensure that each one "be helped to grow in its own distinct way and to develop its capacity for innovation while respecting the values of its proper culture".[5]

Third challenge: the definition of the concept of knowledge and the consequences that derive from this. All the elements considered so far lead us to ask ourselves about our ways of knowing, aware that the fact that the type of knowledge we implement already has moral implications in itself. For example, it is reductive to look for the explanation of phenomena only in the characteristics of the individual elements that compose it. There is a need for more structured models, that take into account the interplay of relationships of which single events are woven. For instance, it is paradoxical when referring to technologies for enhancing a subject's biological functions, to speak of an "augmented" person if one forgets that the human body refers to the integral good of the person and therefore cannot be identified with the biological organism alone. A wrong approach in this field actually ends up not by "augmenting", but by "compressing" man.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* and especially in *Laudato si'*, I emphasized the importance of knowledge on a human,

organic scale, for example highlighting that "the whole is greater than its parts" and that "everything in the world is connected".[6] I believe that such insights can foster a renewed way of thinking also in the theological sphere;[7] indeed, it is good for theology to move beyond eminently apologetic approaches, to contribute to the definition of a new humanism and to foster reciprocal listening and mutual comprehension between science, technology and society. Indeed, the lack of constructive dialogue between these realities impoverishes the reciprocal trust that underlies all human coexistence and every form of "social friendship".[8] I would also like to mention the importance of the contribution of dialogue between the great religious traditions to this end. They possess secular wisdom, which can help in these processes. You have shown that you know how to grasp its value, for example by promoting, even in recent times, interreligious meetings on the topics of the "end of life"[9] and artificial intelligence.[10]

Dear brothers and sisters, faced with such complex current challenges, the task before you is enormous. It is a matter of starting from the experiences we all share as human beings and studying them, taking on the perspectives of complexity, trans-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration between different subjects. But we must never be discouraged: we know that the Lord does not abandon us and that what we accomplish is rooted in the trust we place in Him, "who lovest the living" (*Wis* 11:26). You have committed yourselves in recent years so that scientific and technological growth be increasingly reconciled with a parallel "development in human responsibility, values and conscience"[11]: I invite you to continue along this path, while I bless you and ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.

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[1] Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, no. 141.
[2] Cf *Humana communitas*, 6 January 2019, nos. 12-13.
[3] Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate*, n. 69.
[4] Cf. no. 65.
[5] Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, no. 51.
[6] Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, nos. 234-237; Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, n. 16.
[7] Cf. Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium*, nos. 4-5.
[8] Cf. Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, no. 168.
[9] Cf. *Position Paper of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions on matters regarding the end of life*, 28 October 2019.
[10] Cf. Signing of the *Rome Call for AI Ethics*, 10 January 2023.
[11] Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, no. 105.