



The Church and Artificial Intelligence

Although artificial intelligence may be considered as a recent and new field - particularly in its relationship with the Church as institution - dialogue and reflection on this topic, have been going on for some seventy years.

The first occasion was in Detroit in 1987, when Pope John Paul II spoke publicly about robotics, explaining that machines cannot replace man in the world of labour. A number of questions, still predominant today in our present scenario, began to emerge: "Can the soul be digital?" and also "Does the digital have a soul?".

Starting in 2016, the Pontifical Universities began to develop the first calls and debates on the topic which, despite different opinions, approaches and methodologies, reached the conclusion that machines must have the sole purpose of helping and supporting man in his activities.

From that moment on, the Church encouraged its own members - Catholic Christians in the first place - to work together to make technology human-centred.

But, how can commonplace arguments be avoided? The path, as explained hereinafter, has not been easy, and that is why the debate on artificial intelligence should include ethics.

Academics, researchers, scholars and theologians, within the Church, have defined which key and indispensable characteristics artificial intelligence must have, in order to be employed in daily life. We therefore speak of:

- Transparency (knowledge of the algorithms and criteria used for intelligent machines),
- Reliability (principle preventing any impact of machines on human beings),
- Justice and fairness (principles of racial, sexual, political non-discrimination),
- Freedom (principle requiring the respect of confidentiality and privacy),
- Democracy (principle governing data governance),
- Respect for dignity and moral conscience.

To summarise, in a word, one could speak of benefit, not merely intended as economic profit, but rather aiming at the well-being of the person first and foremost.

AI operates with linguistic and neurolinguistic systems, which are exactly identical to those used in the worlds of communication and information. This is why, who works and operates in these two fields needs ongoing updating, training and keeping up with technological innovation and related doctrine.

If artificial intelligence continues to be a mystery, an alien to us, one can reflect on the concrete and, by now, almost mainstream utilization in journalism and graphics: there are multiple press releases and images, also disseminated online, entirely written and created by artificial intelligence.

Should we intentionally decide to use it, we must always specify the sources used to create our content (regardless of whether the final product was created with the use of A.I.) and verify, above all, the veracity of data connections since occasionally, A.I., connects information that is not actually interrelated).

Experts advise reflecting according to guidelines aiming at:

- An inclusive dialogue: carried out within the Church, with stakeholders and states to discern and summarise criteria according to the different technical fields: the engineering teams in charge of machine operations and the humanistic and religious teams who instead, deal with the implications, consequences and contradictions of such mechanisms. In this regard, one must be aware that sovereign entities, such as the European Union, for example, and states, are currently, discussing on the regulation of artificial intelligence and its orientation with unique and shared codes.

- A dialogue that avoids scaremongering: a few years ago, scholars and researchers viewed with fear and mistrust social networks, and one could anticipate the same fear towards artificial intelligence. However, any extreme position in one way or the other only widens the distance, making dialogue impossible.

For further reading:

- Rome Call for AI Ethics:
https://www.romecall.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/RomeCall_Paper_web.pdf
- The book “The Digital Soul. The Church on the test-bed of Artificial Intelligence” by Giovanni Tridente:
<https://www.taueditrice.it/libro/anima-digitale/>

Questions for reflection:

1. *Have we already used Artificial Intelligence tools? If yes, which ones?*
2. *Which questions and queries does this more or less developed machine-man relationship pose us?*
3. *If we have schools or we work with young people: which approach, are we choosing to engage in a dialogue with them?*
4. *Do you provide training on the subject in your organisation/institution?*

Miriam Di Bartolo, UISG Communications Assistant

Contact: assistente.comunicazione@uisg.org