



(From [the Alphonsian Academy Blog](#) )

The “exciting opportunities and grave risks”<sup>[1]</sup> that generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) provide, along with its rapid adoption, have alerted the international community. ChatGPT was launched on November 30, 2022, and two months later had already reached 100 million active users, “making it the fastest-growing consumer application in history.”<sup>[2]</sup>

On March 22, 2023, more than 1,000 technology experts, researchers and investors signed an open letter<sup>[3]</sup> cautioning against the “profound risks to society” posed by giant AI systems. The letter called for a six-month suspension in their development. Notable signatories included high-level specialists like Yoshua Bengio, and entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk, co-founder of OpenAI, and Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple.<sup>[4]</sup>

## The need for ethics

Pope Francis’ approach to AI is critical but not pessimistic. He invites us “to set aside catastrophic predictions” and, at the same time, urges the international community to “adopt a binding international treaty that regulates” its development and use.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Besides, he insists that “regulation is, of itself, not sufficient.” Without ethics, we may become “rich in technology and poor in humanity.” Thus, he urges the establishment of “bodies charged with examining the ethical issues arising in this field” (WCD 2024). Fundamental human values must be protected, such as inclusion, accountability, transparency, equity, privacy, and reliability.

The Media and AI are much more than “lifeless instruments requiring proper use.”[6] Their impartiality “is merely an appearance” (WCD 2014). They have an ethical dimension that is intricately tied to the decisions made by their designers and developers, as well as the objectives and interests of its owners.

*Laudato si'* had already affirmed that the media respond to the commercial interests of the multinationals that control them and, therefore, they promote the same capitalist model of development that has caused the current socio-environmental crisis (cf. LS 47). They influence not only our lifestyle but also the world and our symbolic horizon.

### **Many ethical challenges**

AI tends to reduce reality to what a computer can process, leaving out fundamental dimensions of human experience. According to Jean Baudrillard, the new media are creating autistic subjects, because they abandon the symbolic and replace it with self-referential signs and images. Peter Brooks adds that “metaphor is a language that the computer cannot process, but if metaphors were missing, prophets, priests, theologians would be silenced.”

AI’s “great possibilities for good are accompanied by the risk of turning everything into abstract calculations that reduce individuals to data, thinking to a mechanical process, experience to isolated cases, goodness to profit, and, above all, a denial of the uniqueness of each individual and his or her story. The concreteness of reality dissolves in a flurry of statistical data (WCD 2024).

Pope Francis affirms that AI is “radically affecting the world of information and communication, and through it, certain foundations of life in society” both for good and bad. When misused, it can put in danger the dignity of the human person. Indeed, by processing everything coldly, as binary code, AI can jeopardize our admiration for personal mystery, exacerbate selfish individualism, and neglect “the essential human values of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness.” Having lost the respect for privacy, systemic errors can easily multiply, exposing the individuals “to forms of bias and discrimination and digital exclusion.” Once AI technologies have inserted personal data into their gigantic databases, they can “eliminate the possibility of an individual changing and leaving his or her past behind” (WDP 2024, 5).

At a social level, AI can promote a surveillance society that undermines freedom and pluralism. In fact, without our knowledge, AI technologies can extract and structure data “for commercial or political purposes, thus limiting our conscious exercise of freedom.” It can also be used “in campaigns of disinformation” intended to condition public opinion, interfere in elections, or “create forms of groupthink” (WDP 2024).

Pope Francis invites us to reflect on how AI can promote an environment suitable for preserving pluralism and portraying the complexity of reality. The risk, he says, is that sources are “reduced to one alone, thus fostering a single approach, developed on the basis of an algorithm”. Besides, AI puts in danger “data ownership, and intellectual property” (WCD 2024).

### **Building a future of hope**

Among these and many other ethical challenges, it is important to remember that the Church “would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize”[7] these “wonderful technological discoveries”[8] and did not try to evangelize the culture they create.

In some way, we are all responsible for directing AI and algorithms towards a fuller life for the human person. Indeed, “the purpose and the meaning” of AI operations depend on us (WDP 2024).

We must “confront and interpret the newness of our time and rediscover the path to a fully human communication” (WDC 2024); i.e., we must enter this global process of discernment, “each in his or her own way, with openness but also with sensitivity to everything that is destructive and inhumane therein.”[9]

[1] Francis, «Message for the 57th World Day of Peace» (WDP), Jan 1, 2024 (www.vatican.va. Accessed: Jan 26, 2024).

[2] <https://www.reuters.com/technology/chatgpt-sets-record-fastest-growing-user-base-analyst-note-2023-02-01/>

[3] Cf. <https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments/> (Accessed: Jan 26, 2024).

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/mar/29/elon-musk-joins-call-for-pause-in-creation-of-giant-ai-digital-minds> (Accessed: Jan 26, 2024).

[5] Francis, «Message for the 58th World Day of Social Communications» (WCD), Jan 24, 2024 (www.vatican.va. Accessed: Jan 26, 2024).

[6] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, «An appeal to all contemplative religious» (June 3, 1973), in *Internet*:

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_03061973\\_contemplative-religious\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_03061973_contemplative-religious_en.html).

[7] Paul VI, «Evangelii nuntiandi», 45.

[8] Second Vatican Council, «Inter mirifica», 1.

[9] Guardini R., «Letters from Lake Como», quoted in WCD 2024.