HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE
BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO
SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 230327c

Monday 27.03.2023

Audience with participants in the “Minerva Dialogues” meeting organized by the Dicastery for Culture and Education

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the “Minerva Dialogues” meeting, organized by the Dicastery for Culture and Education.

The following is the address delivered by the Pope during the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear friends,

I welcome all of you as you gather in Rome for your annual meeting. Your assembly brings together experts from the world of technology – scientists, engineers, business leaders, lawyers and philosophers – and representatives of the Church – curial officials, theologians and ethicists – with the aim of studying and fostering greater awareness of the social and cultural impact of digital technologies, particularly artificial intelligence. I greatly value this ongoing dialogue, which in recent years has allowed you to share contributions and insights and to benefit from the wisdom of others. Your presence is a sign of your commitment to ensuring a serious and inclusive global discussion on the responsible use of these technologies, a discussion open to religious values. I am convinced that dialogue between believers and nonbelievers on fundamental questions of ethics, science and art, and on the search for the meaning of life, is a path to peace and to integral human development.

Technology is, and has been, immensely beneficial to our human family. We think, for example, of the countless advances made in the fields of medicine, engineering and communications (cf. *Laudato Si’*, 102). In acknowledging the practical benefits of science and technology, we also see them as evidence of the creativity of human beings and the nobility of their vocation to participate responsibly in God's creative action (cf. ibid., 131).

From this perspective, I am convinced that the development of artificial intelligence and machine learning has

the potential to contribute in a positive way to the future of humanity; we cannot dismiss it. At the same time, I am certain that this potential will be realized only if there is a constant and consistent commitment on the part of those developing these technologies to act ethically and responsibly. It is reassuring to know that many people in these fields are working to ensure that technology remains human-centred, ethically grounded and directed toward the good. I am also gratified to know that a consensus has emerged on the need for development processes to respect such values as inclusion, transparency, security, equity, privacy and reliability. I likewise welcome the efforts of international organizations to regulate these technologies so that they promote genuine progress, contributing, that is, to a better world and an integrally higher quality of life (cf. ibid., 194).

Reaching a consensus in these areas will be no easy task. Indeed, “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience” (ibid., 105). Moreover, our present-day world is marked by a wide variety of political systems, cultures, traditions, philosophical and ethical approaches and religious beliefs. Discussions are increasingly polarized and when public debates lack trust and a shared vision of what makes for the dignity of life they risk being contentious and inconclusive.

True consensus can only be the result of an inclusive dialogue, in which individuals seek the truth together. This is possible if there is a shared conviction that “inherent in the nature of human beings and society there exist certain basic structures to support our development and survival” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 212). The fundamental value that we must recognize and promote is that of *the dignity of the human person* (cf. ibid., 213). I encourage you, in your deliberations, to make the intrinsic dignity of every man and every woman the key criterion in evaluating emerging technologies; these will prove ethically sound to the extent that they help respect that dignity and increase its expression at every level of human life.

It is a source of concern to me that evidence to date suggests that digital technologies have increased inequality in our world. Not just differences in material wealth, which are also significant, but also differences in access to political and social influence. Certain questions need to be raised. Are our national and international institutions able to hold technology companies accountable for the social and cultural impact of their products? Is there a risk that increased inequality could undermine our sense of human and social solidarity? Could we lose our sense of having a shared destiny? Our true goal must be for the growth of scientific and technological innovation to be accompanied by greater equality and social inclusion (cf. *Video Message to the TED Conference in Vancouver,* 26 April 2017).

The problem of inequality can be compounded by a false understanding of meritocracy that undermines the notion of human dignity. There is a sound basis for recognizing and rewarding merit and human effort, but there is also the danger that the economic advantage of the few will be viewed as something earned or deserved, while the poverty of the many is seen as, in some sense, their own fault. This approach fails to take into adequate account people’s unequal starting points with regard to wealth, educational opportunities and social ties, and treats privilege and advantage as personal achievements. As a result – to put the matter plainly – if poverty is seen as the fault of the poor, the rich are exempted from doing anything about it (cf.*Meeting with Representatives of the World of Labour*, Genoa, 27 May 2017).

The concept of human dignity – and this is central – requires us to recognize and respect the fact that a person’s fundamental value cannot be measured by data alone. In social and economic decision-making, we should be cautious about delegating judgements to algorithms that process data, often collected surreptitiously, on an individual’s makeup and prior behaviour. Such data can be contaminated by societal prejudices and preconceptions. A person’s past behaviour should not be used to deny him or her the opportunity to change, grow and contribute to society. We cannot allow algorithms to limit or condition respect for human dignity, or to exclude compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and above all, the hope that people are able to change.

Dear friends, I would conclude by reiterating my conviction that *only truly inclusive forms of dialogue* can enable us to discern wisely how to put artificial intelligence and digital technologies at the service of the human family. The Biblical story of the Tower of Babel (cf. *Gen* 11:19) has often been used as a warning against the excessive pretensions of science and technology. Scripture actually cautions us against the presumption of wanting to

“touch the heavens” (cf. v. 4), that is, to seize and usurp the greater horizon of values that connote and safeguard our human dignity. When this happens, it always results in grave injustice within society. The story of the Tower of Babel makes us think of the difficulty of making a brick: it requires mud, straw, and the work of moulding and firing. Whenever a brick fell, it was seen as a great loss; people cried, “We lost a brick!” Yet if a worker fell, no one said anything. That should make us think. What is more important, a brick or a man or woman who works? Something to think about. As a result of the Tower of Babel, the creation of different languages opened up, like all of God’s interventions, a new possibility. As a result, we are invited to see difference and diversity as a source of enrichment, for uniformity, an imposed uniformity, does not allow for growth. A certain uniformity of discipline is good – perhaps – but an imposed uniformity is not. Lack of diversity is a lack of richness, for diversity forces us to learn together from one another and thus humbly to rediscover the authentic meaning and scope of our human dignity. Let us not forget that differences stimulate creativity; “they create tension, and in the resolution of tension lies humanity’s progress”(*Fratelli Tutti*, 203), whenever tensions are resolved on a higher plan that does not destroy the poles in tension but allows them to mature.

I offer my prayerful good wishes for your dialogues, and I thank you for your efforts to listen to and reflect on each other’s contributions. I give you my blessing and ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.