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Audience with participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Culture

At 11.10 this morning, in the Consistory Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Culture, dedicated to the theme “The future of humanity: new challenges to anthropology” (Vatican, 15-18 November).

The following is the Pope’s address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I welcome you and I thank Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi for his greeting and his introduction. This Plenary Assembly has chosen as its theme the anthropological question, proposing to understand the future lines of development of science and technology. Among the many possible issues for discussion, your attention has focused particularly on three subjects.

First, *medicine and genetics*, which enable us to look inside the most intimate structure of the human being and even to intervene so as to modify it. This makes us capable of weakening diseases considered incurable just a short time ago; but it also opens up the possibility of determining human beings by “programming”, so to speak, certain qualities.

Secondly, the *neurosciences* offer increasingly greater information on the functioning of the human brain. Among these, fundamental realities of Christian anthropology such as the soul, self-awareness, and freedom are shown now in an unprecedented light and may even be seriously questioned by some.

Finally, the incredible progress of *autonomous and thinking machines*, which have already become to a certain extent components of our everyday life, leads us to reflect on what is specifically human and makes us different

from machines.

All these scientific and technological developments induce some to think that we find ourselves in a unique moment in the history of humanity, almost at the dawn of a new age and at the birth of a new human being, superior to what we have known so far.

They are in effect great and serious questions and issues that we find ourselves facing. They have been in part anticipated by science fiction literature and films, echoes of man's fears and expectations. Therefore, the Church, which follows closely the joys and hopes, the anguish and fears of men in our time, wishes to place the human person and the questions that relate to it at the centre of her reflections.

The question on the human being: "What is man that you are mindful of him?" (Psalm 8: 5) resonates in the Bible from its very first pages, and has accompanied all the journey of Israel and of the Church. To this question, the Bible itself offered an anthropological answer, that is already outlined in *Genesis* and runs through all of the Revelation, developing around the fundamental elements of *relationship* and *freedom*. Relationship draws on a threefold dimension: towards matter, land and animals; towards divine transcendence; and towards other human beings. Freedom expresses itself in self-reliance – naturally relative – and in moral choices. This fundamental system has for centuries sustained the thought of much of mankind and still maintains its validity today. But, at the same time, today we realize that the great principles and fundamental concepts of anthropology are rarely called into question even on the basis of a greater awareness of the complexity of the human condition, and require further exploration.

Anthropology is the horizon of self-understanding in which we all move, and it determines our own concept of the world and our existential and ethical choices. In our times, it has often become a fluid, changing landscape as a result of socio-economic changes, population shifts, and intercultural exchange, but also due to the spread of a global culture and, above all, the incredible discoveries of science and technology.

How should we react to these challenges? First of all, we must express our gratitude to the men and women of science for their efforts and for their commitment to humanity. This *appreciation of the sciences*, which we have not always known how to manifest, finds its ultimate foundation in the plan of God Who "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world ... [and] predestined us for adoption to Himself as sons" (*Eph* 1: 3-5), and Who entrusted us with the care of creation, "working and taking care of" the earth (cf. *Gen* 2.15). Precisely because man is the image and likeness of a God Who created the world for love, the care of all of creation must follow the logic of gratuity and love, of service, and not of domination and bullying.

Science and technology have helped us further the boundaries of knowledge of nature and, in particular, of the human being. But they alone are not enough to provide all the answers. Today, we increasingly realize that it is necessary to draw on the treasures of wisdom preserved in religious traditions, popular wisdom, literature and the arts, which touch the depths of the mystery of human existence, not forgetting, but rather rediscovering those contained in philosophy and in theology.

As I wished to affirm in the Encyclical *Laudato si'*, "we urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge ... in the service of a more integral and integrating vision" (no. 141), so as to be able to overcome the tragic division between the "two cultures", the humanistic-literary-theological and the scientific, which leads to a mutual impoverishment, and to encourage a greater dialogue between the Church, community of believers, and the scientific community.

The Church, for her part, offers some great principles to sustain this dialogue. The first is the *centrality of the human person*, which must be considered an end and not a means. This must be placed in harmonious relation to creation, not as a despot guarding God's legacy but rather as a loving custodian of the work of the Creator.

The second principle it is necessary to remember is that of the *universal destination of goods*, which also regards those of knowledge and technology. Scientific and technological progress serve the good of all humanity, and their benefits cannot be of advantage only to a few. In this way, one avoids that the future will add

new inequalities based on knowledge, and increase the gap between rich and poor. The great decisions on the direction of scientific research and investments in the latter must be taken by society as a whole and not dictated solely by the rules of the market or the interest of the few.

Finally, the principle remains that *not all that is technically possible or feasible is therefore ethically acceptable*. Science, like any other human activity, knows that there are limits to be observed for the good of humanity itself, and requires a sense of ethical responsibility. The true measure of progress, as Blessed Paul VI recalled, is that which aims at the good of every man and man.

I thank you all, Members, Consultants, and Collaborators of the Pontifical Council for Culture, as you carry out a valuable service. I invoke upon you the abundance of the Lord's blessings, and I ask you, please, to pray for me.
