

BISHOP JOSEPH TOAL'S MESSAGE FOR World Communications Day - 12 May 2024

In his message for World Communications Day 2024, Pope Francis has focused on the theme: *Artificial Intelligence and the Wisdom of the Heart: Towards a Fully Human Communication.*

The theme is closely linked to the Pope's message for World Day of Peace, which was devoted to the development of systems of artificial intelligence (AI). AI is "radically affecting the world of information and communication, and through it, certain foundations of life in society," says the Pope in his Communications Day message, adding that "these changes affect everyone".

So, the Pope asks, "how can we remain fully human and guide this cultural transformation to serve a good purpose?"

In answering this question, the Holy Father notes that "at this time in history, which risks becoming rich in technology and poor in humanity, our reflections must begin with the human heart".

He recalls that, in the Bible, the heart is seen as the place of freedom and decision-making, "symbolising integrity and unity, while also engaging our emotions, desires, and dreams".

But, he continues, the heart is, above all, "the inward place of our encounter with God." He adds: "Wisdom of the heart, then, is the virtue that enables us to integrate the whole and its parts, our decisions and their consequences, our nobility and our vulnerability, our past and our future, our individuality and our membership within a larger community."

The Holy Father goes on to stress that such wisdom cannot be sought from machines. Although the term "artificial intelligence" has replaced the term "machine learning," he said, "the very use of the word 'intelligence' can prove misleading".

The Pope explained that it is not enough to be able to store data, like machines do, but that this data must be made sense of, and "human beings alone" are capable of this. "Depending on the inclination of the heart, everything within our reach becomes either an opportunity or a threat."

He notes that the technology of simulation behind AI algorithms can be useful in certain specific fields. However, he adds, the use of AI becomes “perverse when it distorts our relationship with others and with reality”.

In fact, it is extremely important to know that in the wrong hands, such tools could lead to “disturbing scenarios.” Artificial Intelligence must be regulated, asserts Pope Francis, acknowledging that, as in every human context, “regulation is, of itself, not sufficient”.

Pope Francis then invites everyone to grow together, “in humanity and as humanity,” recalling that we are all challenged to make a qualitative leap in order to become “a complex, multiethnic, pluralistic, multireligious, and multicultural society.”

In Scotland at the present time there is much debate about the use of smartphones in schools and a growing concern that overdependence on them may hamper the development of our young people.

This debate reflects the concern of the Holy Father who warns that “information cannot be separated from living relationships”. He explains that relationships involve the body and an immersion into the real world, but that they also involve human experiences, “compassion, and sharing”.

Bringing his message for World Communications Day to a close, Pope Francis recalls that “it is up to us to decide whether we will become fodder for algorithms or will nourish our hearts with that freedom without which we cannot grow in wisdom.” Only together, he concludes, can we increase our capacity for discernment and vigilance and for seeing things in the light of their fulfilment.

Pope Francis then prays that humanity may never lose its bearings and that the wisdom present before all modern technology may return to us. Wisdom, says the Pope, can help us “to put systems of artificial intelligence at the service of a fully human communication”.

In echoing the prayer of the Pope I hope that as a Catholic community we too will use all forms of modern communication in the service of compassion and the promotion of the values of the Gospels.

Bishop Joseph Toal

*President, National Communications Commission
Bishops’ Conference of Scotland*