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Theology and Human Dignity in the Face of Artificial Intelligence and Modern Media[1]

Abstract: Digital culture is having a profound impact on theological values in several key ways. The rapid development of technologies and digital platforms is changing the way people perceive and practise their faith. Artificial intelligence and digital tools allow access to different sources of information, leading to a pluralisation of theological perspectives. People are exposed to a wide range of opinions, which stimulates debates on fundamental theological issues. At the same time, digital culture brings challenges to moral values, as the relativisation of values can lead to the loss of a common moral ground. Technology is becoming a tool for spiritual practice, as faith communities use digital platforms to transmit teachings. This raises the question of the authenticity of these experiences and personal connection to the divine. Ethics and accountability in the digital age is also a key challenge, where decision-making algorithms raise new questions about accountability. Digital culture is therefore changing the understanding of faith and ethics, which requires the adapting of theological approaches to contemporary challenges. Dialogue between tradition and modernity and the development of ethical guidelines for the use of new technologies in the spiritual life are crucial.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, the pastoral method, digitisation, ethics, theology

Teologia i godność człowieka w obliczu sztucznej inteligencji i nowoczesnych mediów

Streszczenie: Kultura cyfrowa wywiera głęboki wpływ na wartości teologiczne na kilka kluczowych sposobów. Szybki rozwój technologii i platform cyfrowych zmienia sposób, w jaki ludzie postrzegają i praktykują swoją wiarę. Sztuczna inteligencja i narzędzia cyfrowe zapewniają dostęp do różnorodnych źródeł informacji, co prowadzi do pluralizacji perspektyw teologicznych. Ludzie są narażeni na różne opinie, co stymuluje debaty na temat podstawowych kwestii teologicznych. Jednocześnie kultura cyfrowa stanowi wyzwanie dla wartości moralnych, ponieważ relatywizacja wartości może prowadzić do utraty wspólnej płaszczyzny moralnej. Technologia staje się narzędziem praktyki duchowej, ponieważ społeczności religijne

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wykorzystują platformy cyfrowe do przekazywania nauk. Rodzi to pytanie o autentyczność tych doświadczeń i osobiste połączenie z boskością. Etyka i odpowiedzialność są również kluczowymi wyzwaniami w erze cyfrowej, w której algorytmy decyzyjne rodzą nowe pytania o odpowiedzialność. Kultura cyfrowa zmienia zatem rozumienie wiary i etyki, co wymaga dostosowania podejść teologicznych do współczesnych wyzwań. Dialog między tradycją a nowoczesnością oraz opracowanie etycznych wytycznych dotyczących wykorzystania nowych technologii w życiu duchowym mają kluczowe znaczenie.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuczna inteligencja, metoda duszpasterska, cyfryzacja, etyka, teologia

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is an interesting topic for pastoral ministry, but there is very little scientific debate on the subject. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church regularly engages in the debate on AI and its ethical use. In February 2020, the Pontifical Academy for Life organised its 26th General Assembly of members under the theme "'Good' Algorithm? Artificial Intelligence: Ethics, Law, Health" (Pegoraro and Curzel 2023). Finally, they issued the document Rome Call for AI Ethics (Smith et al. 2020).

Throughout history, all communication tools have been used to help people, but they have also been misused to the detriment of people. Every technical addition to man can be a means of service or a tool of domination over others (Platovnjak and Svetelj 2023, 978–80). Pope Francis stresses that AI is the technology of the future and that its positive future will depend on the extent to which its development respects human values: inclusiveness, transparency, security, fairness, discretion and reliability (Frančišek 2024b). AI systems can be a tool to help free people from ignorance or a means of cognitive pollution. "It is unacceptable that the use of artificial intelligence should lead to groupthink, to a gathering of unverified data, to a collective editorial dereliction of duty" (Frančišek 2024c). At the G7 meeting, Pope Francis highlighted the ambivalences of AI: the excitement about the benefits of AI and the fear caused by its use; the increased democratisation due to access to knowledge, the exponential progress of scientific research, the possibility of transferring heavy work to machines, but also the increased inequity between developed and developing countries (Frančišek 2024a).

The use of AI omnipresent. If it can benefit us and if it can do us good, why not integrate it into pastoral theology and why not use it in pastoral practice? To study this topic, we will summarise the main ethical dilemmas of AI, the highlights of the documents of the Holy See, examples of different practices of the use of AI in pastoral care and give some guidelines for the future in the light of the criteria of the theological pastoral method. From an ethical point of view, it is necessary to ensure that the tools of AI do not harm human beings and that we protect their dignity and integrity (Benanti 2022, 128). At a minimum,

a dialogue that allows ethics experts to engage in dialogue with AI developers at all stages of decision-making should be ensured. The pastoral aspect of involvement is even more demanding, since for Pope Francis good dialogue means: leading to kerygma, working with diversity and inter/trans disciplinarity or networking (VG[2], 3). A reckless rush to innovate can never respond to the needs of the community in a given historical period. Therefore, a pastoral-theological reflection is needed that examines the signs of the times, draws up clear concepts and formulates them into operationally feasible goals (kairological, criteriological and operational dimensions). In the following, we will highlight, on the basis of the pastoral method of the theologians Sergius Lanza and Paolo Asolan, the essential aspects that include or exclude AI in pastoral work (Asolan 2009). Today, pastoral practice is already seeing some forms of the use of AI. How cautious should we be caution in assessing these tools? Just as traditional and digital media play an important role in preaching, so we see the importance of AI today. Training in AI is of great importance, helping us to use it critically in our pastoral work as well.

2. Some practices of using AI in pastoral care

There are many ways of using AI in the pastoral ministry, but not all of them are good. Just as today, we critically evaluate the harmfulness of digital media (Spitzer 2021), so too we need to evaluate AI (Benanti 2022). In the flood of advice and reports of good practice, we have focused on recent examples in explanatory or pastoral work.

Selamat and Nasrani report on where AI is being used for pastoral purposes on a large scale. They mention that pastoral workers consult AI chatbots on which topics and content to use for sermons. Some pastoral workers are even said to be doing research on the wellbeing of members of the congregation. They claim that a chatbot counsellor or teacher is already being used in practice to educate about religious topics. They give an example of how AI is used in office work (e.g. inventorying property). They give an example of AI being used in prayer and praise as a voice aid. In catechesis, AI is an aid to interactive viewing of catechetical content for children. They also mention a study by Hebrews (2021), which is said to confirm the fact that the use of AI increases pastoral success and also the number of the congregation (Selamat and Nasrani 2024, 68).

How far can we go with the use of AI without falling into the deification (divinization) of AI or into idolatry? The problem arises when we use technology to exploit real results for an illusory game. Tarca compares this illusory play to a circus act. People in the circus are aware that it is a trick, while people who are interacting with these technologies are convinced that they are dealing with something real. Therefore, these people are victims of an illusionist game (Tarca 2023, 87).

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[2]   *Veritatis Gaudium* (Francis. 2018).

In the Swiss town of Lucerne, a kind of play or circus has been put on by the AI-powered Jesus in St Peter's Church. People could talk to him in 100 different languages. It was humiliating and undignified to hear the parish priest, Marc Schmid, declare that they were doing an experiment on people and watching how they were being healed by the AI Jesus (Kassam 2024).

Howard discusses seven ways in which clergy can use AI to enhance their work: sermon preparation; writing and editing; pastoral care and counselling; inclusive congregational networking and outreach; data analysis for future decision-making; language translation and interpretation; and administrative support (Howard 2023).

The ubiquitous integration of machines in our lives blinds some people to the idea that it is possible to have a human relationship with a machine. Later, in the pastoral method, we will highlight the relationship between man and God (in the context of the principle of the incarnation): God incarnated and established a relationship with man in order to redeem man. The above-mentioned authors overlook this fundamental relationship. It is not only God's relationship to man, but also the relationship of the priest (catechist, religious leader) to man. (Sadowski 2021). It goes without saying that today this relationship is also possible through chatbots and online forums. Noreen Herzfeld is also convinced that a relationship that was previously only possible through a priest is now possible with chatbots (Herzfeld 2002).

Such an attitude cannot be accepted in the context of the pastoral method. It is not possible for the attitude towards the machine to be equivalent to the attitude towards man (Šegula 2024). We can replace the machine, but not the man.

Stoddart goes further, describing an example of how we in the pastoral ministry would like to critically assess people's lives in such a way as to reduce concerns about the unpredictability of death. He also adds the importance of AI in critically assessing information and for finding ways to increase empathy (Stoddart 2023).

Let's also mention the traces we leave on the web using AI. These are useful data for web analysts: AI helps them to identify patterns, trends and correlations in religious data that were previously difficult to detect using traditional methods. Alkhouri reflects on this: "AI-powered sentiment analysis helps researchers understand the emotional tone and mood associated with religious texts and their impact on individuals' beliefs and behaviour. In addition, AI is being used to simulate religious experiences and rituals, providing insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying religious practices. The integration of artificial intelligence into the study of the psychology of religion offers new perspectives and methodologies that contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals perceive, interpret and engage with religious beliefs and experiences. Ultimately, exploring the impact of artificial intelligence on the psychology of religion promotes reflection on the nature of spirituality, the formation of beliefs and human experience in general" (Alkhouri 2024).

AI is already being used in pastoral ministry as a tool for sermon preparation, for research on the well-being of members of the congregation, as a chatting counsellor or teacher in education on religious topics, in office work, in prayer and praise, in catechesis,

as a tool to increase the effectiveness of pastoral work and also the number of members of the congregation. Nevertheless, it can expose us to dangers such as the deification or idolatry of machines, falling prey to illusion tricks, degrading and undignified attitudes towards human beings and the equalisation of the relationship between man and machine. Before pointing out the ethical dilemmas, let us see what theology has to say.

3. Pastoral theology missing in discourses on AI

Pope Francis, already in 2017, in the Apostolic Constitution Veritatis Gaudium (VG), stressed that the moment has come to look at the fruits of evangelisation practised in different parts of the world and in dialogue with different cultures. At that time, AI was not as much in the foreground as it is today. However, the Pope's thought that evangelisation means a new chapter in the proclamation of the truth, which must not be an abstract idea but a concrete Person, Jesus, the Word, Life and Light of God, is very relevant today, when the issue of proclamation by means of AI is at the forefront. Pope Francis sees an inseparable link between revelation (the message of Jesus) and the historical tradition of the Church, which has always been open to novelties and proposals in a critical way (VG 2017, 3).

We live in a digital age where AI-driven tools are ever more present. Castells has studied the power of the network society. Economic, political and business forces compete in the network. At the same time, there is more control (Castells 2009). Today, the question of the appropriateness of using AI in the pastoral is being debated. There was a similar debate in the 1970s about the appropriateness of using traditional media (print, radio, television) for pastoral ministry (Viganò 2008; PavelVI 1963). There were debates about the Internet and social networks in the 1990s (Spadaro 2014).

Ethical issues are at the heart of AI. Pastoral and theological issues are not found in public discourses. However, pastoral theologians and pastoral workers also live in a network society. Today, with the help of AI, we can easily determine if our claims are incoherent, false or heretical. There is therefore a real need to harmonise and unify theological thinking. In doing so, it must open itself up to other disciplines and embrace in dialogue, without losing its own integrity.

Some theologians point out that theology is becoming marginal or irrelevant in scientific discourse. One of these is the theologian Carlo Casalone, who is also a literary critic, philologist and historian of Italian literature. Casalone is convinced: "The risk of theology becoming de facto irrelevant in the current cultural developments is decidedly high. For theologians, the awareness of this marginality means that they must not exclude themselves from a world shaped in their own way and thus become irrelevant in the life of the Church and of society at large" (Casalone et al. 2024, 174).

In order to achieve the credibility of theological knowledge (especially in the area of reflections on the ethics of life), it is necessary that within theology all theological claims are coherent. They must be intelligible and reasoned in relation to other forms of knowledge. In doing so, one must not give up one's own originality just to suit the needs of the people of our time.

Communication is very widely developed in the Catholic Church. This can also be a barrier to ensuring that all the claims of the Catholic Church are always understandable and coherent. The theologian and Cardinal Avery Dulles summarised this diversity of communication in five communication models: institutional, communal, sacramental, missionary and secular-dialogical (Dulles 2005).

Dulles was specific when analysing individual documents and media. This is what pastoral theology should be, given the time and place in which the Church finds itself. It must therefore keep before its eyes the historical principle of the Incarnation, which is always the same and valid for all times. In other words, the reciprocal dialogue of pastoral theology with the innovations of a particular time, culture and place is one of the basic elements studied in pastoral theology. It is a matter of reflecting and discerning, and only then embracing innovation. This dialogue also does not imply applicability (e.g. applying theory to practice without knowing the specific context) (Asolan 2009).

Dialogue is a style of human life, of ecclesial vitality and of theological reflection. Dialogue is inherent in theological research. It treats each topic as an inexhaustible horizon of perspectives in order to approach the truth. Dialogue allows the possibility of being interrupted by the contingency of the other and of God. The discovery of truth takes place in the dynamics of a relationship (Casalone et al. 2024, 174; Platovnjak and Svetelj 2024, 157–82).

Language systems that can produce sermons, that can produce texts, that can produce advice on life issues, that can analyse data, have become of great interest to pastoral care (Kassam 2024; Brown 2024; FasterCapital 2024; Howard 2023).

All aids can be useful as long as they do not cause harm. These tools are not simple, like chalk used to be for writing on a blackboard, but they leave traces. That is why: transparency, inclusiveness, fairness, reliability, respect for security and privacy are essential. Transparency requires, as a matter of principle, that artificial intelligence (AI) systems are understandable to all and that those designing and implementing AI solutions are prepared to explain their decisions clearly. Inclusion requires that the needs of all people are taken into account so that all can benefit and be provided with the best possible conditions for expression and development. Fairness requires that we do not act according to arbitrary prejudices that are not adequately expressed and discussed, thus safeguarding justice and human dignity. Reliability requires that AI systems are able to work reliably, i.e. that they do not work in a way that is different from what has been implied. Security and privacy require that AI systems operate in a way that does not cause harm and respects the confidentiality of users (Casalone et al. 2024, 155–56).

Although theology is becoming irrelevant in scientific discourse, there is a serious need to examine current events through theological eyes. This is made possible by the pastoral method, which inextricably links practice and theory in the development of pastoral action.

4. The pastoral method

The pastoral method is a way of discerning in a concrete historical event that has visible consequences in conceptualisation and pastoral action (Lanza 2003; 2005). On the one hand, it is about careful reflection and practical solutions, on the other hand, it is about avoiding a priori exclusion. The theologian Paolo Asolan summarises the pastoral method synthetically in three constitutive principles: non-deduction, non-reduction and dialectical reciprocity (Asolan 2009, 31–36).

Because of the complexity of the pastoral method, Asolan excludes purely exploratory approaches. Neither the deductive method (applying theory to practice - deduction) nor the inductive method (grounded in gnoseological explanations and sociological research - reduction) are suitable approaches for the pastoral method. In spite of this the pastoral method involves other disciplines (intradisciplinarity) and takes a positive attitude towards other disciplines. This attitude towards the different disciplines is reciprocal to the extent that each discipline retains its own identity and method. The different disciplines only exchange results with each other.

In this way, pastoral theology will preserve its authenticity, while at the same time being protected from the simplistic sociological study of religion. The risk of theology becoming irrelevant in our times will also be reduced. New media, digitalisation and the integration of AI in the pastoral field must be distinguished in terms of the kairological, criteriological and operational dimensions. Just as Lanza and Asolan have re-grounded and rederived the pastoral method in the age of new media, it is necessary to do so today in the age of AI.

The very word *methodos* implies a movement from point A to point B. To move, the theological pastoral method is defined in three stages: analysis and evaluation, decision and planning, implementation and verification. A pastoral method is a way of moving from the current state to a new, better state. In all these phases, three dimensions are always present: kairological, criteriological and operational (Asolan 2009, 20–26).

4.1. Pastoral method: the kairological dimension

The *kairological* dimension concerns the reflection on the actions of the Church in the present historical moment and concrete situation in the light of an explicitly theological horizon (*kairos*). It is an understanding of the present situation in the light of salvation history

(in faith) and has the task of pointing to the presence of the Spirit in concrete reality (Szamocki 2021, 638–39). A wise reading of the sign of the times (the zeitgeist) is in keeping with the perspective of Christian discernment. It is not a matter of projecting an ideological-spiritual deformation, of simplifying the understanding of reality, of introducing simplistic dogmatic solutions in a *deus ex machina* manner, and of reducing the presence of the Spirit's action to the zone of the incomprehensible, but of accepting reality as it is, in step with the times (it is not a voluntaristic approach, nor of relying on the use of up-to-date techno-practical devices and resources), of analysing reality accurately and of interpreting it theologically (Asolan 2009, 20–26).

How to discern the appropriateness of AI at this historical moment through theological eyes?

Pope Francis highlights concerns about respect for the dignity of workers, the importance of employment, job security, wage fairness, etc. He believes that in all likelihood, in the future, AI will have a major influence in decision-making and determination in the following cases: the reliability of the borrower, the suitability of an individual for a particular job, the possibility of a convicted person reoffending, the right to political asylum or to social assistance (Frančišek 2024b).

The problems Pope Francis highlights are visible in everyday life. AI has begun to be used in the pastoral as a tool for various activities. That is why we must mention here people's fears about the use of AI and the ethical issues.

4.1.1. Fears of AI, representations of AI and difficulties in using AI

AI is evolving rapidly. Most people are very poorly informed about how AI works, its benefits and drawbacks. In our paper, we argue that it is not the technology that inspires fear because of its potential power, but the human who uses it.

Fear is often associated with power. One of the main sources of AI power is data. The central interest is how to create hybrid or synthetic data to solve complex problems. Floridi argues that the more AI is able to solve complex problems, the more successful it will be (Floridi 2022, 84).

The constant flow of data between physical and virtual reality, enabled by the World Wide Web with computers and smart devices, is filling the pool of historical (authentic), synthetic and hybrid data. For Floridi, historical data is that which is real-life or input data. He calls data that is entirely generated by AI synthetic (Floridi 2022, 70). Hybrid data are the product of historical and synthetic data. It is precisely because of anonymisation that historical data are the most "impoverished" (Floridi 2022, 72).

Today, as everything related to AI is influenced by the digital revolution, the scientific research on robots has also been transformed, changed, adapted and distorted. Reis and colleagues have reflected on this, noting that machines, because of their mechanical

and analytical nature, tend to outperform humans in performing standardised tasks. He adds that they do not, however, have the technological competence to replace humans (Reis et al. 2020).

Current issues that are written about in the media and are in some way central to people's conversations also touch on AI. Righetti and Carradore analysed almost 3,000 news stories from online media in Italy between 2014 and 2018. They found that the number of news stories relating to robots doubled during this period. The most common topics related to AI are the "employment" of robots in social sectors (e.g. caregivers in hospitals, conductors of orchestras at festivals and exhibitions), the physical threat of robots to humans, fears of job losses, the war on robots, and coexistence between humans and robots (Righetti and Carradore 2019).

Weidinger and colleagues developed a systematic overview of risks based on the analysis of large-scale language models and classified them into six areas: 1) discrimination, hate speech and exclusion; 2) information or misuse of information risks; 3) risks of misinformation or false information; 4) malicious use of systems; 5) risk of adverse consequences from human-computer interaction; 6) risk of environmental and socio-economic damage (Weidinger et al. 2022).

Here we will limit ourselves to the areas where today's human being is most vulnerable: discrimination and misuse of information (Vodičar 2023).

Discrimination. Never in history has any medium (from books to electronic media) allowed everyone open access to all its privileges of power, but there has always been regulation (Meyrowitz 1995). It could be said that there has always been a certain degree of resistance to the power of the media and of discrimination in terms of access to it (Jeglič 2023). That is why it is utopian even today to demand that AI should be accessible to all and with equal powers. The first obstacle is financial - AI applications come at a price. With the advent of the internet and the digitisation of goods (documents, products, relationships, etc.), the desire for "everything" to be free, for "everywhere" to be accessible, for everyone to be influenced, and for the utopian idea of cyberdemocracy, has grown (Lévy 2008). But this soon turned out to be an illusion (Lanier 2010).

In this respect, Floridi draws attention to the problem of racial, gender and religious discrimination. He proposes a requirement for algorithmic fairness in four areas: anti-classification (protection of race, gender categories), equal ranking (common criteria for predicting performance), logarithm calibration (the algorithm acts the same towards all protected groups) and statistical equality (the same way of calculating the mean probability for all members of the protected groups) (Floridi 2022, 163–64).

The Pope also points out that AI can increase prejudice and discrimination. There could be a systemic failure, a chain reaction, which could result in real forms of social inequality (Frančišek 2024b).

The problem of misuse of information and harm. We want to highlight not only the problem of misinformation, which is a daily occurrence in the digital age (Lah 2018),

but also inaccuracies due to simplification. Benanti points this out with the example of the map, if it were an exact copy of reality. If it were theoretically feasible, it would in fact be useless because it would contain too much information. Similarly, AI cannot take into account all the data because there is too much of it. Just as we decide to take a route based on a map, so we use AI to decide to perform an operation based on some data.

Ethical issues in the context of the development and use of AI are not transient issues that you ask at the beginning and then ask no more. These issues are constitutive and must be present at all stages from development to use of the UI (Benanti 2022, 124).

4.1.2. Answers to ethical dilemmas as an aid to pastoral theology

The relationship of pastoral theology to the other sciences is dialectically reciprocal (Asolan 2009, 31–36). Theology must take into account all the facts, including all the sciences, to be effective. AI does the opposite, because it has to reduce large amounts of data so that they are functional.

Benanti shows a symbolic comparison with maps. They are a reduction or selection of reality. But we have accepted these errors that are in the maps. Similarly, AI has to process and reduce a lot of data. That is why the AI sometimes gives wrong solutions. In this context, Benanti asks the question: "How can we ensure that this fallibility does not harm the values that are considered to be core and fundamental?" (Benanti 2022, 124).

Benanti points out that ethics, in its minimal understanding, must provide a fail-safe system. This means that all dangers must be translatable at "both poles of the synthetic cognitive relation: man and machine. On the human side, this means making the algorithmic criteria underlying the machine and its operation transparent and accessible to human cognition. On the machine side, it means developing algorithms that, on the one hand, do not create situations in which the intervention of the system misleads the human decision-maker, and, on the other hand, are able to 'read' or 'understand' the human ethical instantiation by translating and implementing it in 'machine language'" (Benanti 2022, 127).

For Benanti, the most important thing is human dignity and the subordination of the machine to the human being. In this regard, he points out four communicative qualities that intelligent machines should have: intuition, ingenuity, adaptability and submissiveness. For him, machines are only acceptable if they are able to interact with humans according to certain guidelines. This means "not only that they will not harm human beings, but also that they will be able to protect their dignity and ingenuity without dulling their intrinsic value" (Benanti 2022, 128).

Artificial machines should acquire a kind of Cartificial humility" that allows the machine to identify what is the priority it needs to do. In the case of a vacuum cleaner, it should understand whether to vacuum as much dust as possible or to vacuum only a little dust at the moment and return to that function later because other priorities have arisen for the

people in the room at the moment. "The operational priority is not in the algorithm, it's in the person, that's where dignity sits. In a mixed environment [between machines, and humans], it is the person and his unique value that establishes and prioritises: it is the robot that works with the human, not the human that helps the machine" (Benanti 2022, 131).

Respect for human dignity mainly seeks to protect people from manipulation, to protect their privacy, to invite their consent, to do them justice and to engage with them in a semantically friendly way (Floridi 2022, 226; Globokar 2023, 866–69).

For Benanti, the **relational** aspect between man and machine is essential. "This relationship cannot only take place on in the realm of reason, but must also take on - and be able to process - the whole emotional question, of which the human side is the bearer" (Benanti 2022, 126).

In the world of health, these AI technologies show a remarkable capability that could replace medical staff. Health care today knows a new frontier: interaction and collaboration between human beings and AI or robots. "As human-like robotic AI systems evolve, so does the need to understand the identity that these machines assume by taking on roles previously reserved for humans (e.g. caring for the elderly or educating and raising children). It is therefore essential to take into account the aspect of our own identity that we form or assume in our interaction with these systems when we ask ourselves to understand the identity of such and similar AI systems" (Centa Strahovnik 2023).

There must be penalties for any damage that a machine may cause to a human being. Behind the machine is a human being who must be held accountable for his actions. Floridi points out that "an artificial agent can be causally responsible for a crime, but only a human agent can be morally responsible" (Floridi 2022, 185).

Ethics must be involved in the design and planning processes of AI systems. The only way to have confidence in AI systems is to have ethicists monitoring the design of the algorithms, the engines of these digital systems, at all stages of their production (ethical design): from their conception to their use. So from design and production right through to distribution (Benanti 2022). In short, ethical issues must therefore be resolved at the experimental, design, production, distribution and marketing stages (Frančišek 2024b).

To this end, the term "algorithm ethics" has been coined, i.e. the ethical principles expressed by those who develop these systems, which are put into practice when the software is implemented. In this context, it will be necessary to establish a method for understanding not only the decision-making criteria of AI-based algorithmic agents, but also their purpose and objectives. This will increase transparency, traceability and accountability, thus making computer-aided decision-making more valid (Casalone et al. 2024, 156).

Accountability, transparency and traceability coincide with the kairological dimension of the pastoral method. It must take into account all the beneficial and all the harmful features of AI. Before all the risks of AI listed above, pastoral theology must also guarantee safety from errors caused by machines, the subordination of the machine to the human being and

respect for human dignity. Although we can expect more abuses than any previous technology, we can also expect far greater benefits than ever before.

In the principle of the incarnation, the incarnation of God, man is very important: God takes on the body of man for His own habitation. It would be hard to say that God takes over the machine for man's salvation. That is why we firmly believe that the sacraments will always be administered by man. However, we do not exclude the possibility that in the future chatbots will become more and more involved in the search for ideas and advice (Šegula 2024).

We must also take into account the Pope's documents on AI in the context of the kairological dimension. On the one hand, he expresses concern that humans will use AI to manipulate and control. On the other hand, he is enthusiastic about the new possibilities that AI offers. The Pope highlights the greatest concern about the use of AI for military purposes, manipulation and social control. He sees positive potential for AI in agriculture, education and culture. AI could improve the inclusion of the weakest people. Educational institutions have an important role to play in encouraging critical thinking about AI, the ability to discriminate in the use of data and content, and knowledge of the social and ethical aspects of technology development (Frančišek 2024b).

AI is a useful tool in the process of communication, as long as all the risks and dangers listed above are taken into account. This is a historic moment, a career, an opportunity and a temptation. The next dimension is that which helps us to conceptualise this opportunity in order to usefully incorporate it into pastoral work.

4.2. Pastoral method: the criteriological dimension

The criteria are like a "nerve centre" for the whole methodological process: they determine the normative coefficient of action and the practical outcome of the theological-practical elaboration. Catechesis, for example, cannot be analysed and evaluated without knowing its content and its norms, which are already established within the kairological and operational dimension. The choice of activity is situated in a concrete relationship with the participants. This requires an appropriate and concrete form of communication. Criteria are never predetermined, but must be worked out within the kairological and operational dimension to help us choose the topic, maintaining the correlation between the concrete situation and the theological content. Principles, as opposed to criteria, are already given and are therefore permanent. The development of the criteria is linked to practice (pastoral) and is included in the pastoral method from the very beginning; it is not something to be added (applied) later. Therefore, the criteria are not an abstract theological text, even though they have a "theological place", they are discovered in the concrete practice of the faithful of a particular ecclesial community, where there is a great variety of practices, often even contradictory. A phenomenological description of practice is therefore not sufficient to

achieve the "theological place" of the criteria (Riccardo 1986, 92). Criteriological processing is carried out in a way that follows an epistemological perspective on the basis of an appropriate intradisciplinarity (delimitation between the domain proper to faith and the domain of reality - anthropological, historical, cultural). In this respect, the interaction is in the manner of an asymmetrical dialectical reciprocity. Asymmetry shows and respects the importance and unconditionality inherent in faith, while reciprocity (reciprocity) communicates how faith itself, by virtue of the principle of incarnation, not only allows but demands that the concrete determination of Christian-ecclesial action takes place within the historical-cultural coordinates of (Asolan 2009, 20–26).

Pope Francis, in his search for answers to the pressing questions of our time, also speaks of four criteria: leading to kerygma; dialogical collaboration with diversity; inter/trans disciplinarity, networking. 1) The first criterion is that ecclesiastical and theological studies must become a prelude to contemplation, leading to the "heart of kerygma", or "the heart of the Church". 2) The second criterion is the dialogue of encounter: the truth is the "logos" which creates the "dia-logos" and in this "dia-logos" it is extended to all levels: within the Church and between the different theological perspectives of other Churches; between religious and humanistic convictions; and between believing and non-believing scholars. In this light, the interconnectedness of life issues at a global level are highlighted, which can extend to ethical concerns and include all aspects of social, political and environmental. 3) The third criterion is inter- and trans-disciplinarity, which takes place in the light of Revelation with wisdom and creativity. 4) The fourth criterion is the need for urgent networking between different institutions and theological institutions, as well as between different cultural and religious traditions and different scientific competences, with a particular view to the field of science and technology, and finally involving all humanity (VG, 4c).

In a concrete community, this is where we would develop criteria for the use of AI in the pastoral: guidelines for the use of AI in the pastoral, content with AI-driven tools, etc.

4.3. The pastoral method: the operational dimension

The operational dimension deals with the feasibility of concrete pastoral plans. According to the Italian theologian Paolo Asolano, pastoral theology has historically been more a technology than a theology of ecclesial action. This dimension is not merely concentrated in the moment of implementation, but is present throughout the whole path of the pastoral method and is essential to avoid pragmatism (practice without theory) and dogmatism (theory without practice) on the one hand. The operational requirement of pastoral theology is opposed both by "traditionalism" (which idealises a past that never really existed as it is imagined and wants to set it as the goal for a new future) and by "progressivism" (which promises a perfect world and a future that immediately requires a radical overthrow of the present). Both, in fact, inhibit the operative dimension because they

are ideological and relative: they create either a practice made up of disembodied spiritualisms or a practice in the mode of critical opposition to the present system. In this dimension, the categories of adaptation to a new and different context are critically monitored. This is because there is a danger of simplifying and reducing planning to a repetition of previous (and of others') established schemes of action. This dimension is not confined to one phase of the methodological plan, but is present from planning to implementation, where its impact is most visible. It is not only the orthodoxy that is assessed, but also its effectiveness (e.g. catechesis) (Asolan 2009, 20–26).

Sooner or later, AI will have a profound impact on pastoral theology and pastoral practice. We have mentioned above that AI is already used in pastoral ministry for the preparation of texts, the analysis of well-being, the chat room for religious content, office work, catechesis and prayer. These activities require certain investments and training to use them properly. The operational dimension is where we need to answer the questions what, where, how and who will use AI in pastoral care?

It is already known that AI can perform many tasks that match or exceed human cognitive abilities. AI applications have penetrated almost every industry, from finance, healthcare, transport, agriculture, defence and security. Because of its excellence in processing large amounts of data and its accuracy in prediction, AI has the potential to bring great benefits to humanity.

Accenture (the research group) research shows that 74% of organisations have met or exceeded expectations for their investments in generative AI and automation, and 63% plan to increase their efforts and further strengthen these capabilities by 2026. "Organisations that are ready to reinvent are 3.3 times more likely to succeed in scaling high-value AI use cases. They report 2.5 times higher revenue growth over the 2019-2023 period than comparable companies with the lowest readiness. Only 16% of organisations have the highest level of operational readiness. Intelligent operations are enabled by talent, assets and platforms, methods and processes" (Chakraborty, Tayob, and Rao 2024).

The Pope points out the opportunities and risks of using AI. He uses hard words to criticise modern man: he has lost his sense of limits and has fallen into a spiral of technological dictatorship. This is manifested in his desire to encompass the world completely. However, the fact is that the world is too complex to be fully known and defined, and that algorithms do not provide accurate predictions, but statistical predictions (which often distort information). Algorithms seek to imitate man, but even there we are limited and can only imitate certain functions of man. In addition, AI is dogged by serious threats: selfishness, personal interests, the desire for profit and the desire for power (Frančišek 2024b).

Conclusion

We find that on the one hand, pastorals are already actively using AI (as we saw in the Swiss example), and on the other hand, we have complete sceptics. The Pope points out that we live in a time when we are technically rich but impoverished in humanity. To avoid this impoverishment, our reflections must come from the human heart (Frančišek 2024c).

The pastoral method is an effective way of discerning the use of AI because it is based on non-deduction, non-reduction and dialectical reciprocity. It takes into account the kairological dimension, which evaluates historical innovations in a theological light; the criteriological dimension, which requires us to elaborate new criteria suitable for action; the operational dimension, which forces us to move from point A to point B. We have seen that the pastoral method helps to address the problem of discrimination, hate speech and exclusion; the avoidance of information risks or the risk of misuse of information; the risk of misinformation or false information; the risk of malicious use of systems; the risk of adverse consequences from human-computer interaction; the risk of environmental and socio-economic damage.

If it is true that man has lost his sense of the limit and has fallen into the spiral of technological dictatorship, it is also true that pastoral theology has new environments for proclamation. Pastoral theology is needed, but it must wake up from its slumber and use language that is understandable to modern man.

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