ICTs and the eternal beauty of truth

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This article underlines some aspects of modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) that can provide an opportunity to rediscover, at a cultural level, some aspects of Christian revelation. The main idea is that “God, revealing Himself to His people to the extent of a full manifestation of Himself in His Incarnate Son, has spoken according to the culture proper to each epoch. Likewise the Church, living in various circumstances in the course of time, has used the discoveries of different cultures so that in her preaching she might spread and explain the message of Christ to all nations, that she might examine it and more deeply understand it, that she might give it better expression in liturgical celebration and in the varied life of the community of the faithful” (GS 58).¹

There is a radical paradigm shift that puts communication at the centre of the anthropological question. In culture there exists the widespread conviction that a solely scientific rationality, with its objective dominion over reality (as it was in the 20th century), cannot arrive at the truth behind reality. The truth cannot be confined to universal and absolute affirmations. Knowledge is not dominion, but participation in reality. We are conscious of not being able to continue with a form of knowledge that is objectivising and not compromising: our knowledge of reality has to be reinvested with an open attitude, capable of entering into relations with it. We cannot advance only by means of sole reason: we are in need of an "accompanied" reason.

Such awareness would seem to constitute one of the few common grounds of humanity at this time in civilization. Different positions coincide in a change of view on transcendence: whilst in the period of modernity transcendence was understood as none other than the ambit of objectivising dominion starting immediately from all that is not the "I," now it becomes indispensable to establish relational ties with it.

In fact, the growing influence of the concept "accompanied" reason persuades one to go out of oneself in order to meet the other, laying the foundations of companionship. In the rediscovery of this relational nature, already pointed out by Aristotle as the fundamental teleological structure of humanity, is to be found the key to happiness and to the realization of the human person. Given that the dialogical nature presupposes free beings, one can affirm that the future of humanity can be explained only in terms of freedom. Looking once again at the point of departure of the cultural victory of technology, one can conclude that post-modern humanity, convinced of having to depend on technology in order to attain happiness, must necessarily integrate it into its dialogical structures.

The new paradigm, therefore, involves the call to the opening of one’s being that realizes itself in dialogue and a strong hand is lent, in this radical duty, by technological developments that are founded on the same principle. More than ever, humans find themselves immersed in a technological ambiance that demands total connectivity (web technology) to which they feel themselves called by their own dialogical nature. Humans, who are conscious of realizing themselves through interpersonal relations by means of the sharing of intentional objects of the intellect and will, know their duty and capacity to do this not only with respect to the spiritual dimension of their being but also to the material. Their interaction with matter
so that it achieves full integration with interpersonal dialogue is the ultimate content of ICTs. In this sense, technology has as its objective increasing the relational nature of humanity.

In other words, it sought to affirm, as Heidegger did with respect to the arts, that technology also can attain the truths of being in a more profound way than science, simply because it is closer to humanity. In fact, the promethean indeterminateness of the material condition of humanity corresponds to the dialogic freedom with which the person interacts with matter in order to make it an object of giving. Similar to the Italian Renaissance at the peak of truly scientific knowledge, technology and art seem to fuse together in the memory of their common semantic origin: the Greek technè.

Luca Pacioli, mathematician and collaborator of Leonardo da Vinci, coined an expression adopted as the motto of the Renaissance: “Man is the measure of all things.” For many, this sentence manifests the autonomous affirmation of humanity, independently of any transcendent dimension. Reality is exactly the opposite: the expression taken from the work De Divina Proportione, means that the human person is the living reflex of the order of the universe created by God and that the person thus becomes the point of reference for discovering this order. Humanity transcends the universe, but the universe and humanity are not two separate realities: humanity includes the rest of material reality in its nature as a dialogical being: each and every “object” can present the occasion for a meaningful relationship.

In the search for meaningful relationships with the cosmos that are never merely objective, but rather invite the participation of persons and their dialogic being, the special fecundity of the artistic experience is evident. In those who enjoy it, it always involves a call external to us, marked by the subjectivity of the artist and is full of complex evocations. Such a call simultaneously involves an opening of the personal being, something not produced by merely objective experience, and an interior enrichment, a consequence of the fact that the same work gives of itself, renders itself present within observers as proper to them: it is “different but not distant”. There occurs a dialogical circularity in which possession of the work of art and possession by it in apparent paradox leads to mutual improvement.

The same happens, and even more so, when the artistic experience occurs within the artist at the moment of creativity. True art involves recognizing the nature of the work as proceeding from another, a revelation and a gift, yet at the same time produced by his own technical ability. In the same way as artists open up to receive the gift of inspiration, they are able to produce the work of art that simultaneously belongs and does not belong to them. Or better still, it belongs to them in its quality as a work of art but in another sense it does not belong to them: it has been given them.

The paradigm of interwoven relations allows us to appraise technology following the patterns of art. The aesthetic dimension of existence has as its basis the transformation of any personal interaction with material reality into interaction with others. The artificial element is seen in its most noble sense: as the product of the free interaction of humanity with material reality and in so far as it is free, the creator of interpersonal dialogue. There is a need to rediscover the anthropological positivism of the term “artificial”, which is always an expression of freedom: in fact, humans themselves are artificial beings, in the measure according to which they are capable of “making themselves”, of “self-constructing” themselves through their own actions, for good or for bad.

For this reason, the production of artifacts, from the technical (machines) to the symbolic (language), has an intrinsic ethical value. The artifice becomes the vehicle of being in the world, of being with others, of being oneself. Technology becomes the occasion for interwoven relations: the aesthetic vision redeems it from the danger, at times unduly
exasperated, of substituting for humanity, and assumes it in a fully humane condition. The more the machine improves and the more it disappears behind its function, the more its true finality is made transparent: humanity.

**Some ethical aspects for the new frontiers of ICTs: humanoid machines**

ICTs and humanoids as ethical subjects. The reality of communication lies in humanity linked to corporeality, for the symbolic ability of language is intrinsically linked with the body. The body is the first human symbolic tool as itself (body language), and also because the word lives in a hermeneutic context and it is possible to fully understand its significance only if the word is pronounced by a concrete person. The word in any way disconnected with the whole person, as for example the word “technically communicated” can have many advantages at the level of historical, social, artistic meaningfulness, but is always below the symbolism of the human pronounced word.

Thus, it is possible to say that the symbolic ability of ICTs is always limited if not joined with a certain corporeality; an ICT system must include, to be considered as humanoid, a bodily dimension capable of establishing relational links with the environment through sensors and effectors: in my opinion, humanoid robotics are the frontier of ICTs. It is possible to consider as humanoid, from the symbolic point of view, a human-machine robotic or non-robotic system that includes in the machine interface (computer or similar) both a human shape and a relative unlimited ability in the selection and modulation of answers to the humans.

Furthermore, the word must be understood in the sense that the symbolic ability of the humanoid is limited only by the same limits of human corporeality; that is to say, the symbolic ability cannot be conditioned by a specific symbolic formality: a book or a computer has an unlimited condition regarding its contents, but the form of the symbol is intrinsically limited by the formality of the instrument. It is possible to say that a book or a computer is a symbolic device, for they contain words; but the specific characteristic of the human or humanoid language is the significant pluri-finality.

The animal world is also symbolic and full of semantic significance (hunger, fear, sexual attraction) but in a limited and univocal sense, because the sign is linked to a meaning in a way defined by the natural adaptive process of the species. The human word, in contrast, has a total conventionality (not arbitrariness!), in which the link between sign and signified reality is added to nature: the human word is not natural, but cultural. The human word lives in a culture in which it can be correctly interpreted; it is not only "voice", but also intonation, gesture, glance, attitude. It is a word with infinite semantic capabilities.

**Ethical dimension of the symbolic function**

The indeterminateness of the symbolic ability in humans shows a gap between being and language, between all that the person reveals through his/her symbolic manifestations and all that is the true perfection of his/her being. This semantic indeterminateness does not mean that such a discontinuity is possible; the ethical dimension of the language consists precisely in this required continuity, carried out through personal freedom. It is possible to say that symbolic ability and ethical dimension coincide.

This ethical gap does not exist in animals, because the animal always behaves according to the perfection of its nature, which is independent of the animal itself. In humans (analogically also in humanoids), language is a form of value and a means for the development of existence and the historical dimension. The unity between being and
language could be named in the ethical field, which is one of the fundamental conditions for the finalistic completion of humanity.

Obviously, machines, like animals, can have a voice; but it is also self-evident that this voice is due to the nature of the machine and not to its culture. In this sense, a machine does not add a special cultural or ethical significance to the purpose for which the machine was designed. If this purpose is good, the machine is ethically good and if it is evil, the machine is evil; but there is no intrinsic ethical value in the machine.

But it is also evident that a humanoid performs autonomous functions that can look like ethical acts, just because the humanoid reproduces the symbolic elements that in humans involve cultural and moral increment. Its product is apparently not a final formalized product (as in a book or in a computer). In humans the ability to act ethically lies in the self-orientation of the actions to the final aim of humankind. What occurs in the case of the machine?

Technology is not limited by the goal of the technical act; every technical achievement opens new possibilities, because technology has no intrinsic end purpose, despite the fact that every technical object has the purpose which is decided in its production. In technology every arrival is a departure.

The human ability in giving a purpose to acts can integrate the objective dimension of the technical act into the free purpose of human acts. This capacity permits the building of unlimited symbolic machines, reproducing the whole human symbolic spectrum. However, in human actions the formalization of an act as directed toward the end is due to the free will, and not to the physical dimension of the act (obviously, this implies that the free will is not reducible to biological functions). The humanoid, instead, formalizes its symbolic act only in the nexus between the physical reproduction of the human act and the formalizing human free will, and not only in the act of reproducing itself. The human free will transfers symbolic ability to the machine through the intrinsic technical capability of human beings. The ethical dimension of this symbolic transfer is vital.

**Elements for a theological consideration**

I would like to propose some reflections about the theological point of view. It is not the aim of these few lines to define what is a theology of communication, but only to underline some aspects of revelation that can enlighten the theological dimension of human communication. In any case, I dare say that a theology of communication is not a part of fundamental theology, since we need to assume the whole content of revelation as a “given”; nor is it part of Trinitarian theology, because human communication has its transcendent origin in intra-divine communication. Intratrinitarian communication is immediate, not in the sense of lack of medium, because the eternal logos can be said to be the medium in quo of divine knowledge, but in reference to the immediateness, simultaneity and co-eternity of the Trinitarian processes. Human communication, instead, is always mediated.

In this sense, I think it is possible to say that the Trinity is not the “model” of human communication, but, as the transcendental origin of human nature, which is created as imago Dei, the intratrinitarian life of God is the archetype that establishes the theological basis for understanding human communication. Between both communications there is distinction and heteronomy, but not independence. By the ad extra process of creation, we are constituted in opposition to God, in the same sense that the ad intra process establishes an opposition between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

*The original condition of matter.* It is in the postmodern need for founding the relational nature of the human being (relationship is not auto-referential), that the biblical idea of
humanity plays a central role. According to this vision, the original condition was that of perfect participation in the Trinitarian dialogue, including the material state of humanity. Matter, in fact, was fully integrated in the “gift dimension” of creation: human interaction with matter had only to improve the Beauty of Paradise (cf. Gen 2:15): the eternal Beauty of Truth would be manifested by the cultural and historical plurality of created truths. The substitution of the Spirit of Truth with the spirit of falsehood had a blurring effect on matter and, as a result, the loss of its relational key.

The Logos, Truth of the Creation, is newly given in the Incarnation in order to restore primordial order; the material dimension of creation gains again its relational power in Christ. Therefore, the interwoven condition of nature is not gathered from the direct experience of the cosmos. The salvific Truth of the full inclusion of the material condition into the dialogical original structure is manifested only in the Faith, and always marked by an eschatological condition, pending fullness. This requires assessment of the profound communion link between mankind and material creation, as established by biblical doctrine and dogmatic development: the Second Vatican Council summarizes this Tradition: “Though made of body and soul, the human is one. Through bodily composition humans gather to themselves the elements of the material world; thus these reach their crown through humans, and through humans raise their voice in free praise of the Creator.” (Gaudium et spes 14a).

This formulation includes a certain idea of “dominion”, participation of the human, as image, in the Lordship of God: “Now, humans are not wrong when they regard themselves as superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the human city. For by their interior qualities they outstrip the whole sum of mere things. They plunge into the depths of reality whenever they enter into their own heart; God, Who probes the heart, awaits humans there; there they discern their proper destiny beneath the eyes of God. Thus, when they recognizes in themselves a spiritual and immortal soul, they are not being mocked by a fantasy born only of physical or social influences, but are rather laying hold of the proper truth of the matter” (Gaudium et spes 14b).

Furthermore, “For humans, created in God’s image, received a mandate to subject to themselves the earth and all it contains, and to govern the world with justice and holiness; a mandate to relate themselves and the totality of things to Him Who was to be acknowledged as the Lord and Creator of all. Thus, by the subjection of all things to humanity, the name of God would be wonderful in all the earth” (Gaudium et spes 34a).

The inclusion of matter in intratrinitarian dialogue. Skipping the biblical basis of these assertions, it is important to underline that the idea of the “willingness” of God towards humanity and creation, revealed in this communion behaviour, is theologically supported by the affirmation of the completeness of the intratrinitarian Life: only this completeness permits the gratuitousness of God’s self-giving in history, and the confession of His absolute Omnipotence. The old-testament qadosh becomes in the New Testament the tri-holiness of the intradivine personal Life: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is thus self-communion, and therefore communion towards the World.

The “beloved creature” is by God loved into the Love that God is in the divine intratrinitarian Life; otherwise the “ad extra” communion would put strain on the idea of divine Transcendence. If “the root reason for human dignity lies in humanity’s call to communion with God” (Gaudium et spes 19a), then humans are necessarily ordered to the eternal processions.

The conceptual tool: the Theology of the Missions. At this point we must introduce the classical “occidental” trinitarian Theology of the Missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit, in which “Mission” is understood as the “prolongation” of the processes in history. Through the
Incarnation and the Gift of the Holy Spirit (visible Missions) the human creature is admitted to the trinitarian Life of Knowledge and Love (invisible Missions). It is of paramount importance to underline that the concept of Incarnation includes the full admission of the matter into intratrinitarian dialogue, as John Paul II affirms in one of his most valuable texts, from the theological point of view.

For the “fullness of time” is matched by a particular fullness of the self-communication of the Triune God in the Holy Spirit. “By the power of the Holy Spirit” the mystery of the “hypostatic union” is brought about – that is, the union of the divine nature and the human nature, of the divinity and the humanity in the one Person of the Word-Son. When at the moment of the Annunciation Mary utters her “fiat”: “Be it done unto me according to your word,” she conceives in a virginal way a man, the Son of Man, who is the Son of God. By means of this “humanization” of the Word-Son the self-communication of God reaches its definitive fullness in the history of creation and salvation.

This fullness acquires a special wealth and expressiveness in the text of John’s Gospel: “The Word became flesh.” The Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God not only of human nature, but in this human nature, in a sense, of everything that is “flesh”: the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world. The Incarnation, then, also has a cosmic significance, a cosmic dimension. The “first-born of all creation”, becoming incarnate in the individual humanity of Christ, unites himself in some way with the entire reality of man, which is also “flesh” – and in this reality with all “flesh”, with the whole of creation (Dominum et vivificantem 50).

In this way the Trinitarian communio is seen as the transcendental foundation of every communication. “Communio” presupposes the immediacy and eternity of the processes; “communication,” including distance in time and space, is the material dimension of the “communio”. This material dimension was originally created by God as the way for humanity to be able to receive God’s forgiveness, and it was protected by the “praeternatural gifts” before human sin. With this protection, matter was “translucent”, allowing perfect communication and sharing of the intentional ends of knowledge and free will, which is the fundament of the idea of Beauty (translucent matter).

This original divine design was destroyed by human free will. With sin, the material condition of humanity, removed from intratrinitarian dialogue, becomes opaque, and involves the whole cosmos. Sin is the “gravedigger of creation.” In the Incarnate Logos and in the Given Spirit it is possible to find the two elements that overcome the paradoxical historical condition of humanity: the filiation, as foundation of interpersonal relationship, and the justification, as redemptive reparation of the opaque condition.

Note
1. This is an abridged version of the full essay, which reviews the problem of technology and the problems introduced into our reflection from technology and then the possibilities of a philosophical recovery based on the concealment and the rediscovery of the person.

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