*INTERNATIONAL EXPERT SEMINAR*

**THE COMMON GOOD IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

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The Foundation dealt with the common good and the impact of the digital age on many occasions over the past three years. Please find attached the main events covered, particularly the impact of digitization on the quantity and quality of work, the social, economic and ethical implications, chiefly those relating to the finance world and the impact on the behavior of people and organizations.

The reflections which follow are the end results of the events indicated and of my own personal research and experiences.

To tackle the subject of the seminar, I will start from the definition of the two aspects mentioned in the title: common good and the digital era.

The "common good" is one of the four principles evoked by the compendium for the Social Doctrine of the Church along with the centrality of the person, solidarity and subsidiarity.

Use of the term "common good" is very broad. I consider it fitting to refer to the definition given by Pope Francis in Laudato Si' which links this principle to integral ecology.

Laudato Si' 156 "An integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics. The common good is "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access their own fulfillment".

In the light of this definition, we can identify the **conditions** for pursuing the "common good" in the availability of:

- Education - training
- Health
- Peace, security
- Water, energy, food
- Work
- Respect / dignity

How are these conditions influenced in the digital age? To answer this, we must start from an analysis of what the digital age is and how it is formulated.

We can describe this era as a world dominated by the presence of digital technology, social media, artificial intelligence, robotics, nanotechnology, biotechnology and neuroscience and by the widespread inter-operability of machines / people.

In general, digitization means a continuous process of converting analogue information - texts, sounds, images, voice, objects, etc. - into computer-readable forms, that is, in binary form. And this

also influences humanity that experiences a process of reduction of relationships and dealings to the 0-1 idea. In these 0-1 relationships, human dignity, as represented by the Social Doctrine of the Church, is no longer a key value (see Father Justin C. Pech OCist, the CAPP Berlin Conference report, 15th - 16th Oct.2017).

AI is part of the digital revolution, it aims to make machines intelligent and develop their ability to learn on their own, build computers that are capable of solving problems on their own and able to develop their own style in pursuing objectives. The ability to understand human language by digital tools is the basis of this evolution and can already be seen in the working of smartphones and Alexa.

Change in the digital world is continuous, widespread and swift. It calls into question the very principle of the world of research and work: Einaudi said "to know in order to decide". The SDC teaches us that we must "look - judge - act", a method that presupposes knowledge. But knowledge becomes difficult in the digital world because change is swift, continuous and often unpredictable. This situation creates anxiety, insecurity, and the fear of decision-making in the world of work and business. There is a growing risk of unaware choices.

Another important aspect to bear in mind is that through the process of quantifying all aspects of life, always being brought back to the use of the 0-1 binomial, humanity can lose its awareness of quality, of the beauty of creation, of nuances.

We live in an era dominated by the "**Divinization**" of technology which by definition is considered good and neutral, while in reality technology is not neutral; it is considered a source of freedom but it is not like this. Software is not neutral; it depends on how it is built and not merely on how it is used.

The digital age offers **many advantages** but it also has its **dark sides**. The former are abundantly and widely emphasized, the latter barely analyzed, but it is prudent to know them and to evaluate the consequences in order to control and to manage them. Technology is undoubtedly the driving force of progress but at the same time it is the disruptive agent that must be properly managed.

**What are the dark sides?**

We can identify:

**Hard problems** = cybercrime

**Soft** issues = privacy, quality of relationships, data processing, distorted use of tools (people dying while taking selfies, cyberbullying) and even personal information, significant impact on the environment (giant rubbish dumps) algorithms that influence our lives and yet we don't know who builds them or how. Some experts point out that e-mail is destroying managers and imposing super-fast decision-making with no time for the necessary assessments. In June 2017, the Economist maintained that the Internet led to the development of ISIS.

**Points of particular attention are:**

**Concentration of power and exploitation:** four major players dominate the sector, have enormous power (competition-privacy problem) and enjoy significant profits that are not shared (a taxation problem). Digital production requires massive use of rare raw materials present in developing countries that do not, however, derive any benefit. It also requires the availability of considerable financial resources that few command. On 6/09/2019, seven attorney generals from eight American states (New York State, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee and the District of Colombia), decided to launch an anti-trust investigation of Facebook. Letitia James of

New York State who heads the initiative, said that "even the biggest social media platform in the world, must follow the law and respect consumers. We will use all the investigative tools at our disposal to determine whether Facebook has abused consumer data, reduced the quality of their choices or determined an increase in the cost of advertising" (Corriere della Sera 7/7/2019).

**Impact on the environment:** the first smartphone was produced in 2007 while over seven billion were produced in 2017 with a significant emission of Co2. A huge amount of **waste**. E-commerce also leads to environmental problems because delivery takes place with large trucks that consume fossil energy and pollute. Energy consumption from the average daily access to a mobile phone is equal to the daily consumption of a 4-floor lift. So, let's think about the level of consumption arrived at through the use of over 7 billion mobile phones! The energy consumption of 200-300 emails sent and received daily is enormous. We do everything by mail and this takes up time, space and energy.

**Individualism:** everyone wants to have one or more mobile phones, one person – one mobile phone - one consumption. This is the opposite of the sharing economy. The sense of community, of relationship as an enriching element, is missing. Psychological solitude is nourished.

**Consumerism:** powered by the same **big four**, instruments are not repaired, spare parts are not guaranteed, devices become obsolete after a short time and are thrown away because new models are quickly introduced on the market. Appliances have at most a 2-year lifespan. Compulsive buying is encouraged. Energy consumption is very high and out of date appliances and devices feed landfills which are burned with devastating impact on the environment.

Important **effects** that are not yet fully known on the **quantity and quality of work**, with significant repercussions – risk of poverty, psychological problems, risk of exclusion - for people who lose their job, their business or their social status. **This topic is particularly relevant for the SDC.**

In literature, a distinction is made between an AI **general** type - one that can replace people even in high-powered jobs such as judges, doctors, risk managers, and the **specific** type where people are replaced in some specific jobs such as driving a machine. It is argued that the general AI type induces greater negative effects, e.g. it can lead the person to become an object and no longer a subject and lose connection with reality (e.g. Prof. Persiani, oncologist-surgeon at the Gemelli Hospital who decided to stop using digital tools for operations because he realized he was losing the three-dimensional aspect, hands lost agility. The patient does not consider it an improvement but endures it uneasily and fearfully). But even the AI specific type can come across new problems that have not yet been faced and cause uncertainty. For example, who is responsible for accidents caused by an automatically-driven car. An issue facing insurance companies.

**Risk of facilitating Crime:** organized crime**,** cyberbullying, identity theft.

**Impact on privacy**: big data usage has important ethical consequences because the data affects all of us, there are problems of respect of privacy and data protection.

Impact on peace: digital wars are spreading, are not perfectly understood and have a serious impact on civilians. There is less empathy towards those who suffer because the sense of reality is being lost.

There is a risk of errors in the construction of algorithms with significant consequences and the possibility of amplifying human prejudices thus creating social inequalities and discrimination. (An example is a Negro business that was refused leasing for racial reasons!)

With these reflections I have tried to highlight the multiplicity of elements involved and the levels for discussing the issue of the common good in the digital world.

There are many challenges:

- Identify the break-off point in the innovation process. There are two opposing positions: completely de-regulate innovation technologies or find the correct balance between innovation and respect for the persons and their development by finding the compass in SDC. In my opinion what is needed is an **effective and fair regulation that reduces risks without stifling innovation**. Not less regulation but good regulation. Progress must not stop but must be governed; technology has taken regulation off guard. For example, the contracts we knew are no longer able to protect the millions of social users, we click "accept" without reading; individual property is in serious crisis; in the age of generalized access, it is no longer possible to understand who owns the copyright. An example is the monkey Naroto's selfie, a 10-year ongoing legal issue to determine who owns the copyright - the monkey or the photographer.
- being able to put **together technology and human sciences**, develop critical thinking, a holistic and synthetic vision at one and the same time,
- **reduce the digital divide**, **the role of the school and training is fundamental**, the use of digital tools is constantly expanding, not only among teenagers but also **children** who are oblivious of the risks. We must help them to become attentive to the dangers inherent in the indiscriminate use of social media. Families are unprepared, they don't know, they must be helped, for example, with courses in schools alongside their children. According to research by the Roma 3 University (prof. Carlo Alberto Pratesi), there is a huge gap between the 20% of university students who know how to use digital tools, are active and productive, have a project and the 80% who are passive and aimless digital users and are simply subject to it. Another important aspect is the use of AI for education. According to experts, AI will certainly revolutionize education, but there is no consensus on how. In China, there are algorithms that take care of the contents of the lessons according to the needs of the pupil and virtual teachers. Some applications can improve learning, but in addition to the dimension of knowledge, the goal of education must be the development of transversal knowledge, the growth of the person that an algorithm is unable to cultivate. In my opinion it would be better to have a good mix between the virtual teacher and the real one. We then have the issue of the **elderly** who are digitally marginalized. We need to study new ways to **reinvent** the school (Pope Francis). Reducing the digital gap is a way to reduce inequalities.
- **restoring priority to the person, strengthening social awareness, reshaping the social structure** through the call to **mercy** that can become an "innovative and motivating source of social justice" enabling each human being to live a rewarding life. (see Thomas Rusche "Is Technical Innovation Serving Socially Inclusive Business ?", p. 10)
- **create and use a technological "system" that contains ethical principles,** hence, a system of responsibility. Who are those responsible for this "new world"? Software developers, businessmen, politicians, spiritual guides and all of us are responsible. How do we account for and answer for our work?

- At what point should we stop? There are two opposing positions: deregulate innovative technologies completely or find the right balance between innovation and respect for the person and their development by issuing fair regulations that should be inspired by the SDC.

To answer this challenge, we should ask ourselves this fundamental question:

**What should the society of the future be like? The SDC says that the person cannot be replaced by a machine** because the human being is God's creature. Pope Francis in Laudato Si' shows us the way: change the development model.

What are the appropriate costs of technological progress? At what point should we stop? Who decides how far to go? These questions are particularly relevant in some areas such as bioethics.

The SDC could be the compass that guides us in answering these questions, but it is a difficult and rough path because the prevailing model is not inspired by the SDC. It is the task of believers to spread it and this is what Centesimus attempts to do in its work. Reference to the Gospel (Gaudium et Spes) in this complex situation, is fundamental.

The digital age changes the technical-economic and social context in which individuals, businesses and institutions operate; agency changes. It influences the physical nature, confidence, love, respect and self-development.

But the objectives of the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC) do not change: solidarity, justice, centrality of the person, human dignity, pursuit of the common good, subsidiarity.

These are permanent objectives that must be achieved using technological innovation at the service of integral human development.

**The SDC must know how to develop a future perspective: how society can work together in the digital world while bearing in mind the relevant ethical issues.**

Hence, the central theme is how separate agents - individuals, companies, institutions, states - can contribute to the common good by operating in the digital world and using technological innovation to reduce risks and be of benefit to everyone.

The role of the **school** is fundamental on this path as are **enterprises** that should use different professionals: engineers, architects, urban planners, economists, psychologists, technicians, sociologists. Adriano Olivetti, an Italian entrepreneur of the past century, said it first and did it; Jobs said it recently. Centesimus, as part of the process of analyzing and disseminating Laudato Si', will dedicate its activity in 2020 to **education and training** bearing in mind the foundations of the school of the future: use of Artificial intelligence, humane common sense, transversal skills and accessibility.

An economy with a human face is possible.

As I mentioned above, Olivetti was an example. For him, the factory was the means to give dignity to the person and development to the community. He imagined a **harmonious society** where development meant a better life for everyone.

We can represent his model as a triad of

Man - factory - community

linked by a common goal to create a society that helps the fruitfulness of relationships and the well-being of everyone.

To do this he made use of **diversified skills**: engineers, economists, architects, urban planners, philosophers. His goal was to pursue the wellbeing of shareholders, employees and community together. And he did it successfully.

In the digital world, the plurality of skills is fundamental as is a highly developed social conscience.

The recent Statement from the Business Roundtable (19th August 2019) which includes some of the contents of the encyclicals Laudato Si' and Centesimus Annus, outlines a series of guidelines that are a move in the right direction. However, this raises some questions:

- Is the Statement sincere or is it a marketing initiative to respond to the growing preference of big investors for companies that are motivated by the ESG criteria that are proving more solid?
- Are companies actually and definitely adopting new strategies that aim to create long-term value for all stakeholders, invest in employees and operate fairly and ethically towards their consumers and suppliers? Are they gearing up to measure the impact of these new strategies? Are they adopting new and effective models to account for their work?

**What to do? Some suggestions**

- **Start a broad philosophical movement to understand how and why the prevailing explanatory model - everything in the world can be explained by the 0-1 matrix - dominates the understanding of the human being and the world**
- **Responsible Consumerism**, joint political action, school, families, Church.
- **Give everyone the opportunity to participate in the digitization process: education and training** to reduce the digital gap and open up new opportunities for everybody **= education, restore collective education and rebuild the community model which has been abandoned.** Examples: young people can help the elderly, businesses can train their employees efficiently and constantly, ensure the necessary technological equipment and protect them from electronic mobbing. The school should use external professionals and be responsible for forming / informing families. Parishes could use external digital professionals to speak to families. Restore the roles of intermediary bodies.
- **Adopt rules that encourage the realization of the sharing economy and the circular economy, strong commitment of companies, institutions and politics to achieve community development. Generative economy** is very difficult, but possible,
- **Solve the problem of data ownership,** how to share the huge profits made by large companies by using everyone's data.

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