

Raconteur's Report – Session on AI, Human Dignity, and Catholic Social Thought

Augustin Destremau, Co-founder of [Rerum Novarum](#) and session co-chair, enjoined participants were invited not simply to “hear speakers” but to enter a process of discernment: brief inputs, pauses of silence, then questions. Paul Twomey, session co-chair and co-chair of the [Global Initiative for Digital Empowerment](#), drew a parallel between the early internet and today's AI moment - we have been here before with a transformative technology, and some of the mistakes should not be repeated.

Gabriele Carboni (entrepreneur and author in digital marketing and sustainability) framed AI as a world-class orchestra capable of playing any note at any speed, but without a conductor. Human beings must be the conductors. Without us, what emerges is not harmony but organized noise. Drawing on *Magnifica Humanitas* and on Jacques Maritain's “integral humanism,” he insisted that technology is a gift that only truly serves when it is ordered to the whole person—body, mind, and soul.

Gabriel then offered four “challenges”. First, he reminded the room that no model, however advanced, can capture the mystery of the human person. AI can calculate, but it has no body, no emotional life, no conscience. If we forget that, we drift toward a world where persons are treated like predictable machines. Second, he warned against the construction of digital echo chambers that undermine pluralism. Technology, he argued, should build a “Jerusalem of dialogue,” not a new Tower of Babel that flattens genuine difference into forced uniformity.

His third challenge was that AI may grant “time wealth” by automating repetitive tasks, but if that time is simply reinvested into more productivity, we will have gained nothing. We should instead reclaim time for meditation, prayer, and real human connection, even to the point of “fasting” from AI to protect our inner freedom. Finally, he insisted that we cannot outsource conscience. Algorithms may assist, but we remain accountable for decisions, especially where dignity, mercy, and forgiveness are at stake. To make this practical, he ended with the “3 Ps of Enlightenment”—people, purpose, plan—asking everyone to test their AI projects against those three questions: does this help people grow, is the purpose rightly set, and does the plan respect our common home?

The second speaker shifted to the institutional and geopolitical. Liviu Stribat from the European Commission's research directorate sketched the Union's three main roles in AI: regulator, sponsor of research into AI's societal impact, and guide for the responsible adoption of AI in science. Liviu described the EU's emerging AI regulation and workplace rules on algorithmic management, but focused more on

Liviu spoke to scientists using AI as an accelerator rather than a replacement; for instance the Nobel-recognized work in AI-supported molecular biology. Initially, researchers feared they would be pushed out of their own field by an algorithm. In practice, the opposite happened. AI lifted entire communities of scientists forward by years, leaving them with more, not less, meaningful work. Curiosity and the search for truth did not disappear; they were “put on steroids,” as he put it, and this was offered as a hopeful pattern for other domains—provided that values, training, and oversight travel with the technology.

Alberto Oddino, professor of international law at the University of Turin, spoke to law, power, and the cognitive dimension of dignity. Human dignity, he argued, is not an abstract concept; it includes a person's capacity for autonomous thinking and discernment. Profiling, nudging, and algorithmic manipulation threaten that autonomy by standardizing knowledge and narrowing the horizon of what people see and can imagine. Echo chambers and filter bubbles are not only political problems; they are spiritual problems because they erode the conditions for free will.

Alberto drew particular attention to the concentration of data and computational power. Once AI enters natural language—our primary medium for social life—the entity that controls those systems

wields a form of power that touches our very capacity to relate and to know. Yet Alberto refused to treat today's large language model architecture as inevitable. He proposed alternatives: smaller, tailored models; local and more sustainable systems; and AI "companions" that serve individuals without claiming oracular authority. The real choice, he suggested, is between a "master" AI and a servant AI, between scale for its own sake and architectures that preserve human control, reversibility, and mystery.

Oliver Roethig (regional secretary UNI Europa) spoke to the reality of workplaces. He acknowledged the genuine promise of AI in freeing workers from repetitive, demeaning tasks, but insisted that the crucial test—drawn from Leo XIII—remains the wage. If productivity increases and workers' pay and security do not, then workers are being treated as disposable inputs, not as persons.

His example of content moderation workers in Colombia, Kenya, Ghana, and the Philippines was sobering. These workers absorb the worst of the internet—violence, child abuse, suicide—for wages as low as ten dollars a day, often under surveillance and gagged by NDAs that isolate them even from their own families. A global framework agreement his union secured with a major outsourcing firm was a rare success, and its likely non-renewal a stark reminder of how fragile such gains are. As AI systems increasingly replace or oversee this work, he argued, we move from a "black box" to a "panopticon": dynamic records on every worker, opaque judgments on pay and prospects, and almost no recourse. For him, the only realistic counterweight is collective bargaining, where subsidiarity and solidarity meet—and he called explicitly for the Church's active support in making that a central issue of AI governance.

The final prepared reflection came from Father Fabio Pasqualetti, professor of digital media, Università Pontificia Salesiana. He began with a simple statistic from his university: ninety percent of students reported using AI for almost everything—summaries, slides, graphics—yet the same ninety percent admitted they had no real understanding of how AI works. Technology's seduction, he suggested, lies precisely in that gap: it "just works," so we adjust our expectations of people to match our experience of frictionless tools.

He warned against the anthropomorphizing of AI, especially in a culture already marked by loneliness. Citing an Italian survey, he noted that a significant share of young people now turn to AI systems when they feel sad or anxious, and many find it easier to confide in a chatbot than in another human being. This, he argued, is not a quirky trend but a threat to democracy itself. If young people are not learning to live with conflict, disagreement, and the stubborn otherness of real persons, then the habits of democratic life atrophy.

Fr Fabio traced a line from the "attention economy" of social media to what he called the "economy of intention" in AI: systems that no longer merely capture our gaze, but map our desires and affectivity. The risk is an illusion of knowledge—believing "I know" because a fluent system has produced plausible text—without the slow work of understanding. His pastoral concern was not to ban these tools but to rebuild communities and practices—writing, art, shared projects—through which young people discover themselves and one another outside the logic of optimization.

Anna Maria Tarantola, former Chair of FCAPP, was a nominated member of the panel but at the last minute was unable to attend. Anna Maria communicated to the Co-Chairs that her focus was on protecting children in the age of AI.

As she wrote, protecting the dignity, understood as an intrinsic value of the person, of children and adolescents takes on a highly sensitive connotation because it concerns the right of minors to develop their own identity, to enjoy protection, and to participate meaningfully in society, including in the digital world. Minors are developing human beings, fragile, vulnerable, and insecure. They must be lovingly accompanied on their journey to adulthood. For this reason, the Magisterium of the Church indicates that digital tools, and in particular Artificial Intelligence (AI), in all its variants, must be developed,

applied, and used in a way that always respects the best interests of the minor, avoiding any form of exploitation, manipulation, and discrimination.

The interventions by the invited speakers were followed by an audience driven question and answer session.

A representative working with victims of online child sexual exploitation in the Philippines asked, with some urgency, how this emerging ethical framework could be translated into protection for children who are being abused right now to feed the global appetite for digital content. Others raised questions about new companies that are “AI-native,” about international efforts at the UN, about resistance to reskilling in workplaces, and about the Church’s potential convening power on AI safety, analogous to the way aviation rivals collaborate on flight safety.

Several interventions focused on multilateral cooperation and the UN’s role in governing AI. One speaker emphasized that, despite its imperfections and state-dependence, the UN remains an indispensable core of multilateralism and should frame global debates on AI, particularly around autonomous weapons and AI-driven targeting. While a binding treaty on AI was portrayed as politically unrealistic—echoing earlier difficulties in securing a treaty on internet governance—there was a strong push for “soft law” instruments (guidelines, principles, standards) as more feasible vehicles for global consensus.

Liviu stressed that AI safety institutes, joint US-EU initiatives, and research funding with embedded safety components are already in motion. They highlighted work on governance and whistleblowing mechanisms to detect early misuse, particularly around pathogens and other dual-use scientific capabilities. Yet, this institutional progress was contrasted with a sense of strategic exclusion: it was noted that no European body was invited to participate in the first stage of Anthropic’s high-profile AI safety initiative (“Project Glass Wing”).

A UNESCO representative drew attention to cross-cutting issues largely missing from the initial agenda:

- Gender: AI systems are often trained on biased datasets, compounding discrimination against women and girls, both in terms of participation (lack of women scientists in AI) and harms (deepfakes, abusive content).
- Multilingualism: Out of ~8,000 languages monitored by UNESCO, fewer than 100 have meaningful presence in AI systems. This risks new layers of exclusion, particularly for indigenous and marginalized communities, given that current systems are language-centric and predominantly English-driven.
- Environment: The substantial resource and energy demands of large-scale AI systems were flagged as a critical, ongoing concern that must not be overshadowed by newer AI controversies.

Paul Twomey described practical work on small language models for under-resourced languages (e.g., Quechua-related contexts in the Andes and Amazonia), where, in the absence of dictionaries, teams had to build training data by bringing native speakers together and recording their speech. He suggested that UNESCO and the Church could partner more systematically, leveraging the Church’s extensive global education network (hundreds of thousands of schools and thousands of universities) to expand language coverage from “100 to 300 languages”, if coordination and funding could be mobilized.

One intervention warned that humanity is likely to experience a major “man-made bad event”, whether a cyberattack, AI-enabled conflict, or other catastrophe, that would shock public opinion into demanding stronger protections and governance. The speaker suggested that both the UN and the Church should prepare in advance to respond to such a crisis, framing it not as desirable but as probable, and as an event that could catalyze overdue institutional action. The underlying argument was that political will may only materialize after a concrete, widely felt failure of AI governance.

This prompted further reflection on two distinct but interrelated danger tracks: AI as an amplifier of malicious human intent, and (war, cyberattacks, pandemics, etc.) and rapidly growing AI power and the unresolved problem of alignment with human values and long-term human survival.

Several audience participants spoke to the limits of machine morality, arguing that:

- Ethics cannot be located in the algorithm itself. We can design “ethics by design” processes, but responsibility ultimately resides in human vision, priorities, and political-economic structures.
- Current macroeconomic and socio-technical models risk producing what Pope Francis has described as an “economy that kills,” in which the most vulnerable are rendered disposable.
- There is a danger that large organizations and narratives of “super-machines” push people to feel small, inadequate, and inclined to surrender responsibility, including via hybridization with machines or genetic modification, presented as the future.
- If people surrender their capacity for deep thinking and interpretation (e.g. appreciating the meaning of silence in human interaction) then AI becomes less a tool and more a vehicle for self-imposed atrophy of our own capabilities.

The discussion returned several times to the world of work as an arena where AI’s impact on human dignity and democracy will be keenly felt. A Dutch IT worker spoke of using AI for coding and seeing colleagues use it to gain advantage in internal competition at the workplace. Oliver Roethig expressed concerns about:

- The erosion of solidarity if workers rely more on individual optimization via AI than on mutual support and collective bargaining.
- The risk that employers will force AI adoption, extracting workers’ knowledge into systems that could later be used to replace those very workers.

His proposed counterweight was organization and collective action: joining trade unions, reinvigorating collective bargaining, and insisting on worker participation in decisions about AI deployment. Oliver framed this both as Catholic social teaching and as enlightened self-interest, given that today’s “strong” employee may be tomorrow’s expendable resource.

Concerns were expressed about younger generations and their relationships with both AI systems and human communities. Advanced AI can simulate affective responsiveness. For children or young people with poor family or peer relationships, this can make AI systems appear more emotionally reliable than humans. The deeper problem is social, not purely technological: a failure to offer meaningful, robust human experiences of relationship and community, making simulated companionship more attractive.

Overall, the Q&A painted a picture of AI as a catalyst that exposes existing weaknesses in governance, social cohesion, economic justice, and cultural depth. The recurring call was for renewed institutions, stronger communities, and conscious ethical and political engagement, so that AI remains a tool for human flourishing rather than an instrument of fragmentation and control.

The session closed not with conclusions but with an invitation. Augustin repeated his exhortation to participants to carry one concrete resolution back to their workplaces and communities: one thing they would do differently as a result of this session.

Looking forward, some of the themes which emerged for future engagement by the FCAPP community were:

- Support of children in the AI age;

- Protection of agency for individuals, including as workers, and promotion of dialogue to ensure humanity and wisdom in managing AI depolyments.