

CULTURE E FEDE



CULTURES AND FAITH

CULTURAS Y FE

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Editorial

I would like to welcome readers to the latest edition of Cultures and Faith. As you will see, this edition is focussed on the recent Plenary Assembly of the Council that took place in November 2017. The aim of the Plenary was to open a dialogue about the future of humanity. The last decades have seen extraordinary developments in the fields of genetics, neuroscience and artificial intelligence inter alia. These developments have the potential to radically transform many aspects of human life and they oblige us to think again about how we understand human health and well-being, both physical and psychological; about our comprehension of human responsibility and free will and the interplay with determinism; and about the emergence of forms of machines which could exhibit types of intelligence, language capacities and reasoning powers which we would previously have considered as being exclusive to human beings. These developments call not only for moral evaluation but, more radically, require us to re-examine the anthropological and ethical categories which traditionally we would have employed to make such value judgements. It is this enquiry which lay at the heart of the Plenary.

A particular aim of the Plenary was to understand better the cultural contexts where these developments are emerging. To this end, the intention was to present the state of the scientific research concerning this issues, and to outline the potential applications of recent scientific discoveries and technological innovations as well as their likely impact on areas such as medicine and healthcare, economics and business, and politics and social policy. We deemed it important to understand the aims, objectives and motivations of those who are leading and promoting scientific research. It was also necessary to engage with them to address questions concerning the anthropological and philosophical suppositions underlining their understanding of what it is to be human, and the conception of human life and society that is influencing the direction of their research. Such an approach is especially important in a world where research is globalized and not all involved share the same cultural and ethical traditions. These supposition and conceptions are often implicit rather than articulated, and yet they are the fundamental premises which, whether

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acknowledged or not, actually determine approaches to ethics. The Council was convinced that unless we could examine these deeper convictions and subject them to critical reflection, much of our ethical discourse was likely to remain superficial and unlikely to create consensus and agreement.

Important questions addressed during the Plenary include the following: How will we determine which developments truly respect human dignity?, Who, if anyone, will determine what are ethically objectionable, or unsafe, forms of research and experimentation?, How will research be funded and who will own the intellectual and economic proprietary rights to new applications? These and similar questions are already receiving deserved attention from writers and film-makers and, consequently, have emerged as themes in popular culture. It was intended that the Plenary would open up a deeper and more sustained dialogue around these questions, and to allow the more profound issues concerning human identity and the point and purpose of life, already being addressed by philosophers and theologians, to surface and contribute to public discourse.

The Council is convinced that questions about the future of humanity and the impact of science and technology need to receive the attention of a wider public and cannot be left exclusively to scientists and technologists. We need to encourage a multiplicity of approaches, and an inter-disciplinary synthesis, in which the views that can be offered by different ways of seeing these issues can be mutually enlightening. Such an approach would help us to avoid what Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* calls the technocratic paradigm, which makes the method and aims of science and technology the exclusive epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society.

It is hoped that the material presented in this collection will encourage our readers to reflect on the key questions presented and, more importantly, to give consideration to the possibility of bringing these questions to the attention of different audiences. In particular, it would be worthwhile for local churches to explore the option of promoting similar encounters at the national or regional level which would facilitate a better conversation between scientists, people of faith and representatives of civil society in order to inform public opinion and encourage social engagement.

Paul TIGHE
Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture