

## The New Socio-Cultural Paradigms and the Role of Jesuit Universities

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### A PREMISE

The very word “university” philologically implies the task of embracing the “universe” of knowledge we are immersed in, and the quest to lead a great variety of knowledges into a “unity.” So universities, with their various faculties, departments, institutions, laboratories and so on, must always be careful to look both to the great heritage of the past and to the present time with its cultural paradigm shifts. We wish, here, to raise two different issues from a methodological point of view.

The first is particularly significant within the horizon of the Jesuit universities. In a speech to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2016, Pope Francis proposed an “ancient saying that illustrates the dynamics of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, that is:

*deformata reformare,  
reformata conformare,  
conformata confirmare,  
confirmata transformare.”*

It is clear that there is a need for evolution and continuity in this process, for a dialogue with the past and an encounter with the present, for dialectics but also continuity, for changeable complexity and a basic single project. This is something raised by another voice – that of a personality quite different from Pope Francis – who based himself on the contemporary situation.

Just before he died in 2011, Steve Jobs, the acclaimed founder of “Apple,” made a declaration that can be taken as his ideal testament: “Technology alone is not

enough. It's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our hearts sing." Practically, this was the symbolic synthesis of one of his earlier speeches, given June 12, 2005, at the university of Harvard. He had spoken there of the need to return to the figure of the renaissance "engineer," that is, someone capable of connecting the dots, concluding: "You can't connect the dots looking forward, you can only connect them looking backwards."

Metaphors aside, to forge ahead to the future with an ever acuter and deeper awareness of being and existing, a bridge needs to be built between the present and the past, a bridge between modernity and the classical, between the arts and the sciences, between history and technology. In *De somniis* (II, 234), Philo, the Judeo-Alexandrian thinker of the first century A.D., described the wise person as a *methórios*, that is, one who stands on the boundary between different worlds, *simul ante retroque prospiciens* (with his gaze looking both back and forward) to use the phrasing of Francesco Petrarca, another key figure of western culture and forefather of humanism. So a marriage is needed between the *humanities* and *science*, and it is notable how an acronym that reigned until recently, *STEM* (Science – Technology – Engineering – Mathematics) has been enlarged to *STEAM*, adding the component *Arts*.

## I

### CHANGES OF PARADIGM

The horizon to be considered is so vast and complex that a complete and precise map cannot be constructed, as a large and constantly growing bibliography shows. In fact, compared to earlier times, the socio-cultural panorama is very mobile. For example, the so-called *millennials* have different and new characteristics compared with the youth who were born a decade before. This is reflected in the frenetic evolvment of general structural phenomena. In the following pages I wish to offer just a few reference points, offering them only as markers for a more complete

consideration. Obviously, the issues concern society as a whole and are not just matters for the young people: the youth are, however, its clearest manifestation as they have within them their “genetic” environment.

1. In this first general chapter I will seek to identify some socio-cultural paradigmatic changes. The first concerns the very concept of **culture** that no longer has its original Enlightenment meaning of the intellectual, aristocratic spheres of the arts, the sciences and thought, but has taken on an anthropological character that crosses all sectors of human thought and action, recovering the ancient categories of *paideia* and *humanitas*, two terms that were used in classical times to indicate culture (a word that was then unknown except in the context of “agri-culture”). So the perimeter of the concept is much wider now and embraces, for example, industrial culture, farming culture, mass culture, women’s culture, youth culture and so on. It also appears under the guise not just of national and continental cultures, but also in the shared, universal languages that are a sort of new Esperanto, such as music, sport, fashion, the media.

One clear consequence is the phenomenon of **multiculturalism**, which is however a static concept marking the simple coexistence between different ethnicities and civilizations: more meaningful is when it becomes **interculturality**, a more dynamic category that presupposes a strong interaction where identities enter into dialogue with each other, even if with difficulty. This encounter is encouraged by the ever more prevailing urbanism. The positive osmosis between cultures comes with an array of opposing problems. On one side there is syncretism and the “polytheism of values” that breaks up the identity canons and personal ethical codes; on the other side there is the reaction in fundamentalisms, nationalisms, populisms, localisms (in fact, people now speak of a “glocalization” that undermines the still more powerful globalization).

2. The erosion of cultural, moral and spiritual identities and the very fragility of the new ethical-social and political models, the change and acceleration in the

phenomena, and their almost air-like fluidity (codified in the symbol of liquidity prospected by Baumann) evidently impact *anthropology* itself, particularly as far as the young are concerned. The theme is obviously complex and allows for much analysis and many perspectives. I would point merely to the phenomenon of the fragmented self, tied to the primacy of the emotions, to what is more immediate and gratifying, to the lineal accumulation of things rather than to seeking a deeper meaning. Society, in fact, seeks to satisfy all needs but it also douses the great desires and eludes the broader projects, thereby creating a state of frustration and especially a lack of trust in the future. Personal life is full of consumption yet empty, faded and even spirituality extinct. So narcissism flourishes with the self-referentiality that has various symbolic emblems like the selfie, the earphones, or even the herd of the like-minded, the disco, or fixation with one's own image. But there is also an antithetical offshoot in radical rejection that is expressed through protest for and of its own sake, or brutal bullying, or the verbal and iconic violence on the screens of the social networks, or in generalized indifference, or even descent into drug abuse or suicide in the young.

3. So we see configured here then a new phenotype of *society*. To give an example – referring the reader to the endless sociological data – I would offer a synthesis through a remark of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur: “We live in an era when the bulimia of the means corresponds to the atrophy of the ends.” What dominates, in fact, is the primacy of the instrument over the meaning, especially if it is ultimate and global. We can think of the prevalence of technology (the so-called “technocracy”) over science; or the dominion of finance over the economy; of the growth of capital rather than productive and working investments; the excess of specialization and the absence of synthesis – in all fields of knowing, including theology; to the mere management of the State compared to a real political project; to the virtual instrumentalization of communication that substitutes for personal encounter; to the reduction of relations to mere sexuality that marginalizes and finally suppresses eros

and love; to the excess of religious devotion that weakens rather than nourishes an authentic faith, and so on.

4. Another “social” example that anticipates a more specific argument that I will develop below is seen in a well-established phrase: “There are no facts, only interpretations,” an affirmation that brings in the fundamental theme of *truth* (and also “human nature”). Philosopher Maurizio Ferraris, who studied its social consequences in his essay *Postverità e altri enigmi* (Post-truth and other enigmas – Mulino 2017), comments: “This is a powerful phrase full of promise about the primacy of interpretation, for it offers as a prize the most beautiful illusion: that of always being right, regardless of any denial.” Think of how the most powerful politicians today do not hesitate to hold onto their interpretations and post-truths as instruments of government, spreading them so as to make them appear “true.” Ferraris concludes: “What would the world be – or even simply a democracy – where the rule is accepted that there are no facts, just interpretations?” Especially when such *fake news* is fruit of a deceptive manoeuvre pushed through the virtual arteries of the information networks?

5. Finally, a fleeting reference to the *religious question* is needed. “Secularity” is a typical value of Christianity based on the Gospel axiom “Give to Caesar what is of Caesar, to God what is of God!” and also on the Incarnation which does not cancel out the *sarx* (flesh) for the sake of a spiritualistic gnosis. For this reason, no theocracy or ierocracy can be Christian, nor can sacred fundamentalism, notwithstanding the repeated temptations to follow that road. There is, however, a “secularism” or “secularization” – a widely studied phenomenon, see for example the massive and famous work *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor, from 2007 – that opposes clearly any coexistence and living together with religion. And this takes place along various routes: I will allow two of the more subtle ones to emerge (explicit persecution is certainly the most evident but it is present in limited areas).

The first is so-called “*apatheism*,” that is religious apathy and moral indifference for which whether or not God exists is irrelevant, and the ethical categories are foggy, interchangeable and subjective. This is well-described by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Priority is given to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional. What is real gives way to appearances... There has been an invasion of ways of thinking and acting proper to other cultures which are economically advanced but ethically debilitated” (no. 62). The Pontiff introduces the second route connecting it to the previous one: “It tends to reduce the faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and personal. Furthermore, by completely rejecting the transcendent, it has produced a growing deterioration of ethics, a weakening of the sense of personal and collective sin, and a steady increase in relativism. These have led to a general sense of disorientation” (no. 64).

I underline the first phrase of the papal declaration: it confirms the idea that religiosity is just an interior and personal spirituality, an experience that needs to be relegated to clouds of incense and flickering candles in the sacred space of the temples, separated from the hustle and bustle of the public square. These two aspects of the “new atheism” certainly do not exclude the presence of a more conservative atheism that is still tied to critical and sarcastic attacks (by Hitchens, Dawkins, Onfray, Odifreddi and so on), or the figure of the so-called *nones*, who deny all religiosity, but then paradoxically entrust themselves to pagan rituals...

6. These are just some analytical markers concerning the phenomena that also become pastoral challenges and touch on further important themes such as the concepts of “human nature” and “truth” as already mentioned. They also bring in gender and issues raised by ecology and sustainability (see *Laudato Si*’), which young people are particularly in tune with, or the impact of the economy that is focused on a finance that creates enormous accumulation of capital but also its “virtual” fragility, generating serious social crises and, consequentially, the scourge of

unemployment and poorly paid under-employment. We think too of more specific themes such as the connection between aesthetics and culture, particularly the place of new musical languages for the young people and, more generally, the link between art and faith.

It is important however to reiterate that attention to socio-cultural paradigms should never be an act of mere complaint, nor should we fall for the temptation to retreat into sacred oases, looking nostalgically to a mythical past. The world we live in today is full of ferment and challenges to the faith, but it also contains great human and spiritual resources which young people often possess: suffice it to mention the lived-out solidarity, volunteering, universalism, desire for freedom, curing of many diseases, the extraordinary progress of science, and young people's requests for authentic witness from religions and politics and so on. But this is another very important chapter to be written in parallel to what I have traced so far and goes beyond the limited task I have set myself.

So let us try to shrink the vast and multifaceted horizon mentioned so far and introduce two itineraries to consider as cornerstones of the contemporaneous world: these are science and communication. These are the roads that the young people follow enthusiastically, convinced that the real responses to their many needs are to be found there. These are, in fact, fascinating paths, even if they are only just being opened up. They are able to create genuine revolutions. Considering the complexity of these two pathways and their positive or negative impact on society and on anthropology, I will offer a longer interpretation, even if it remains incomplete.

## II

### SCIENCE AND ANTHROPOLOGY

#### Genetics and DNA

We enter here an open-ended territory that is in a constant state of evolution, where questions continue to multiply. This is the horizon of contemporary science that raises new challenges for anthropology. It redesigns its bases and uncovers the secret phenomena of human nature. And especially it presents itself to the eyes of the youth as being able to offer the only true responses and create a better future. We will evoke three fundamental spheres: genetics with DNA, neurocognitive sciences, and artificial intelligence. Above all the discovery of DNA and its flexibility – and even its mutability – has registered different outcomes: on one hand, research aimed at eliminating pathologies has been developed; but on the other hand, genetic engineering is invoked to improve and change the anthropological phenotype envisaging a future with a radically modified human genome. It is in this final perspective that the still confused panorama of trans-humanism and post-humanism unfolds.

The manipulation of DNA generates an articulated delta of issues of various types – for now futuristic – beginning with the basic one of the human species itself: Will these new anthropological phenotypes still be classified in the genre of *homo sapiens sapiens*? What socio-cultural consequences will be produced by the inequality between “normal” human beings and those strengthened by genetic modification? Does a specific social and ethical identity need to be developed for these “new” people? But the questions are even more turbulent at the theological level: Are these interventions at the heart of human life compatible and so justifiable with the biblical vision of the human person as lieutenant or deputy or “image” of the Creator? Or are they to be classified under the original sin of wanting to be “like God,” in an act of Adamic hubris, as judged in chapter 3 of Genesis?

### **The neuro-cognitive sciences**

A further sphere where research is pushing ahead decisively is that of the neurosciences. In the platonic-Christian tradition, mind/soul and brain belong to

different levels, one metaphysical, the other biochemical. The Aristotelian-Christian concept, while maintaining a substantial autonomy of mind from cerebral matter, admits that the latter is an instrumental condition for the exercise of spiritual and mental activities. A model of nature that is more “physicalist” and spread out in the contemporary horizon does not hesitate – even on the basis of evolutionary theory – to reduce the mind and soul radically to a neuronal statistic, even if it is impressive in and of itself: our brain weighs just 120-180 grams and contains a galaxy of a hundred billion neurons, as many stars as there are in the Milky Way. They communicate with each other through a system of connections called “synapses” that number around a million billion, with a potential interactive combination of around  $100^{300}$  (one hundred to the power of three hundred)! So the temptation to confine each cognitive act to this level is understandable.

Faced with this amount of complexity, I simply underline that human identity comes into play here with its essential element in the brain-mind (however the connection is seen) so that any structural intervention there moves us toward a redefinition of the human being. The sequence of philosophical-theological-ethical problems then is lengthened exponentially. Where, in such an approach, do we place the will, conscience, liberty, responsibility, decision, the calibration between external and intrinsic impulses, the interpretation of information that has been acquired and especially the origin of thought, of symbol, of religion, of art, and, in the final analysis, of the “self”?

### **Artificial intelligence**

This path leads us seamlessly to a third horizon that is equally impressive and fragile, that of the “thinking machines,” that is, artificial intelligence. Currently, robotics is generating machines that are more and more autonomous. Undoubtedly there are positive effects in the field of medicine, productivity, management and administration. But it is in this final sector that questions are raised about the future

of work that is conceived in the classical and biblical vision as a component of hominization itself (as in “cultivate and take care of” and “give a name” to living and non-living beings). The possibility of social unbalance should not be optimistically excluded, especially if a privileged class is formed of those inventing, programming, and owning such machines.

The issues become perhaps more urgent on the anthropological side, given that already today some machines have a clear ability to “own” their words, so creating information autonomously. Then there is the more important ethical side. Which moral values can be programmed into the algorithms that lead the thinking machines in decisional processes faced with the situations they encounter and where they have to make decisions that influence the life of human creatures?

There is concern particularly about so-called *artificial general intelligence* or *Strong AI* whose systems are programmed for an autonomy of machines up to the point of improving and recreating by themselves their own set of abilities, so as to reach a state of “self-consciousness.” This is something that sci-fi novelists and screenwriters have liberally portrayed, but that are now being tried out and have met with the clear and alarming reaction of some scientists such as the recently deceased Stephen Hawking, who stated: “Development of full artificial intelligence could mean the end of the human race... Artificial intelligence will go on alone and will redefine itself at an increasingly fast pace. Human beings, limited by slow biological evolution, might not be able to compete and will be superseded.”

Others are more optimistic about this development for they look with trust to the future as being marked by the primacy of the human person. In fact, as happens for genetics and the neurosciences, so too the new technologies can transform our physical and intellectual abilities to overcome our current limits. Something of the kind can be glimpsed in the fusion between human organisms and technological elements, like the implanting of chips to strengthen memory and intelligence of an individual or strengthen the abilities of some organs, like the eye (the cyborg). More

problematic is the *download* of the human brain to a digital system or the transferal of a digital system into the brain so as to eliminate its limits... Actually, it is natural to react with some apprehension at these leaps ahead, especially when we see the first uncontrollable consequences, such as the surprising case of two Facebook robots, humanly called Alice and Bob, at its Memlo Park HQ in California. In 2017 they had a “conversation” but with a language their programmers could not understand.

To conclude, to date the distinction seemed clear between a machine with artificial intelligence and a human person (even if at the European level there is a paradoxical notion of introducing an “electronic personality”!), following the idea of the U.S. philosopher of language, John Searle, that computers have the syntax but not the semantics. In practice, they don’t know what they are doing. But so-called “Strong Artificial Intelligence” looks to cross this demarcation line with the arrival of machines that are not only thinking but also self-conscious, positing a future that remixes the cards and requires new attention, questioning, and also demythicizing.

### III THE INFOSPHERE

#### **From social relations to social media**

The second itinerary followed by culture and contemporary society is so important in its consequences that, for some, it has created a new anthropological phenotype, seen as a prelude to a post-human one. I am thinking here of the influence of the mass media and the move from social relations to social media. Our horizon is shifting radically. On one side there is the traditional *social* world made of a “warm” web of real and direct relations, where the good and the bad, the true and the false, the right and the wrong, love and hate and so on, kept their identity and there is a consequential dialectic. On the other side we now have the new world of *social* media

where there is a “cold” network of virtual relations, where reality evaporates and categories are mixed, creating a shapeless info-narrative swamp where we see emerging the excesses, the shocks, the explosions, the great bubbles. Yet it remains an essential instrument for relational interconnection.

In this perspective, human physiognomies alter and change the very reality of the “person.” In traditional philosophical understanding this latter term indicated a precise, concrete, configured, nominated identity. Now the same term paradoxically returns to the original Latin meaning of “mask”: think of the use of phantom nicknames or the narrations present in Facebook that offer “faces” that are often pretend and artificial. Luciano Floridi of the University of Oxford, one of the best contemporary “digital” philosophers, has captured acutely this phenomenon with his work *Quarta rivoluzione. Come l’infosfera sta trasformando il mondo* (The Fourth Revolution. How the Infosphere is Transforming the World, Cortina, Milan 2017). After the previous great developments in history and in modern science, that is the three anthropological revolutions – the Copernican, the Darwinian and the Psychoanalytic – we now have the Information-Technology revolution that manages to change the global reference points of democracy itself, not just of culture.

Analysis of the current infosphere is now carried out by a significant number of essays and research projects. Here too I limit myself to offer just some initial pointers. Everybody is now familiar with the early steps of such analysis led by Marshall McLuhan with his considerations on the counterpoint between content and communication with the now abused, stereotyped axiom that “the medium is the message” for which, as the Canadian scholar remarked in one of his essays in *Mechanical Wife* (1951), “today the models of eloquence are no longer the classic ones but the publicity agencies.” They manage to shape the message so well that “today’s Little Red Riding Hood would want to be eaten by the wolf.”

But we have gone on much further. In fact the most important sign of the change in direction concerning the equilibria between content and communication – a

change that the American sociologist John Perry Barlow years ago compared to the discovery of fire in the history of civilizations – lies in the fact that communication is now no longer a *medium* similar to a prosthesis that augments the functionality of our senses allowing us to see or hear at greater distance. Instead, it has become a total, global, collective *environment*, an atmosphere that you cannot not breathe, even if you are under the illusion that you are outside the *infosphere*.

In this way today's communication no longer delineates an "extension of ourselves," as McLuhan understood it (*The Extension of Man* was the subtitle of his 1964 essay *Understanding Media*) but the move to a new "human condition," a new anthropological model whose features are commanded by this all-comprehensive reality whose ruling banner is the Internet. Even Galileo thought that visual ability was only being extended with the telescope, yet what followed was not just a cosmological revolution but also an epistemological and anthropological one where the human person was no longer the center of the universe (the "Copernican revolution"). And so we are immersed in a different "creation" compared to the primordial "creation."

There are already many new citizens fully immersed in this creation, those who since 2001 with Mark Prensky are called *digital natives*, compared to previous generations who can aspire at most to be "digital migrants," incapable – as happens with many immigrants – of losing their old accents. Immersed in this general and global "environment" it is always harder and more senseless to employ an apocalyptic rejection. Rather, we need to be sensitive and critically alert so as not to become "info-obese," that is totally integrated to use the famous antithesis of Umberto Eco's 1964 text *Apocalittici ed integrati* ("Apocalypse Postponed").

### **Some vices of the info-technology communication**

There is no need then to fall into the impossible isolationism or radical criticism à la Popper who in the 1970s loudly contested the new communication

when it was mainly television which was able, in his opinion, to put to sleep the critical spirit, to transform democracy into telecracy, and lead astray the ethical, aesthetic and veritative sense. Yet certainly some communicative vices do emerge that require caution and critical judgement, especially considering that the infosphere is now almost totalizing. The traditional means of communication are in fact in deep crisis as are the agencies such the Church, the State, the school, the press. I will seek then to present some reservations that this new general horizon raises.

At the purely linguistic level a basic problematic phenomenon emerges immediately: as with the citizens of biblical Babel, we risk not understanding ourselves and being incapable of dialogue, becoming victims of a sick communication, which is excessive both quantitatively and qualitatively, and is often injured by violence, approximate and clutching to stereotypes, to excess, vulgarity and even falsification. We need, then, a campaign for **linguistic ecology**: an authentic “communication” – as the Latin root indicates – puts at the disposal of others (*cum*) a *munus*, that is a “gift,” a “mission.” It is then a sharing of values, thoughts, content, emotion.

A further reservation to be signaled concerns another info-technology phenomenon that is positive at first sight: the exponential **multiplication** of the **information** offered. This can lead to an agnostic relativism, an intellectual and moral anarchy, a weakening of ability to be critically selective in interpretation. The hierarchy of values becomes upended, the constellation of truths reduced to a game of variable opinions within the immense basket of information. Unexpectedly something formulated by Thomas Hobbes in his famous *Leviathan* (1651) occurs: “*Auctoritas non veritas facit legem*” (authority not truth makes the law), it is the powerful and dominating authority that determines the ideas, thoughts, choices, behavior, rather than objective truth in itself. The new authority is the prevailing public opinion that obtains more space and becomes more efficacious within this mass of data offered through the info-technological communication systems and so, thereby, creates

“truth.” Emblematic of these consequences to which we can be led – as mentioned above – is the triumph of *fake news*, the nonsense that ingrains itself into, is repeated and spreads through the Internet, regenerating as pseudo-objective truth.

Another critical note points at the degeneration implicit in a component that is positive in and of itself. Under the apparent “democratization” of communication, under the *deregulation* imposed by the globalization of info-technology that seems to be a principle of pluralism, under the very multitude of contents mentioned before, we find hiding the subtle operations of *homologation* and *control*. It is not by chance that the management of the networks are more and more being entrusted to the hands of the “mega-corporations” or centers of power that are able to orient, mold, shape to their own use (and to the needs of their markets and interests) the contents and data, creating thereby new models of behavior and thought. Examples of this are in the recent cases tied to the socio-political use of Facebook data or the interference of external info-tech sources on national election campaigns.

And so we watch what has been brusquely called “a social lobotomy” which removes some consolidated values to replace them with other often artificial and alternative ones. Curiously, the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville in his work *Democracy in America* (1835-1840) had foreseen for the future of American society a system where “the citizen abandons his state of dependency for a moment to elect a patron and then subjugates himself again.” This profile, in a sense, is well-adapted to today’s info-technology society and the syndromes of dependency that it manages to create.

A final critical observation concerns the acceleration and multiplication of contacts and also their reduction to *virtuality*. As mentioned before, we are falling into an era of “cold” and lonely communication that explodes into forms of exasperation and perversion. On one side there is the sold-out intimacy of the “chat lines” or of Facebook, or the so-called reality shows in the sphere of television like Big Brother; there is here a violation of the subjective conscience, of interiority, of

the personal sphere. On the other hand, there results a greater loneliness, a background of lack of understanding, a series of quid-pro-quos, a fragility of one's own identity, a lack of dignity. Barlow observed that as soon as computers multiplied and satellite dishes sprang up on the roofs of our houses, the people closed themselves in and shut their curtains. Paradoxically, the effect of moving toward a virtual reality and toward a mediatic world has been that of the separation between people and the death of a living and direct dialogue in the "village."

### **The realism of critique and the optimism of commitment**

Faced with this problematic horizon, there is a temptation to become discouraged or to give up, to see as unstoppable such a process destined to create a new human standard. What is certainly not Christian is the disincarnated stance taken by those who close themselves into their little ancient world, satisfying themselves with the rules of the past, deprecating the degenerations of the present era. This is true not least for the young people, as this is their world where they were born and find themselves at their ease.

Despite observing that the new mechanisms used to distinguish reality from manipulation and truth from lies, such as photography, cinema and television, have often been used precisely to make illusions, to manipulate and to deceive, the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin, along with many other researchers looking at this phenomena, has demonstrated how the new communication can, in the final analysis, generate a richer and more complex reality that is even more fecund in human terms too. This is what we often find at the ecclesial level, in the proclamation and pastoral engagement through these new "media."

Realism of knowledge and criticism does not justify, though, pessimism in engagement. And this is particularly true for the believer and for the pastor. The challenges are strong, risky and dangerous but for this reason they require trust and courage, and awareness that the heart of the faith is in Revelation, or in the divine

communication that breaks the ineffable silence of transcendence and opens to humanity. This is a dialogue that – in Christianity – sees the Son of God himself in action, after the voice of the prophets and the wisdom of Israel: “No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (*John* 1:18). This communication follows through the apostles orally and becomes written in the early centuries.

It is important to note that it is the very magisterium of the Church in its highest expression that has constantly invited the Christian community not to adopt an isolationist, protective position but to enter into what is the “first modern areopagus,” as Paul had done at Athens (*Acts* 17:22-32). It is well-known that the phrase just cited belongs to the 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*. St. John Paul II recognized there that a “new culture” was in place: it came “not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology.”

The pope, indeed, was convinced that this culture “is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a ‘global village.’ The means of social communication have become so important as to be for many the chief means of information and education, of guidance and inspiration in their behavior as individuals, families and within society at large. In particular, the younger generation is growing up in a world conditioned by the mass media... It is also necessary to integrate that message into the ‘new culture’ created by modern communications” (no. 37). This is something seen in exemplary fashion by the impact of Pope Francis in the new “media” and also in his personal communication as well as his institutional communication (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* no. 79).

In fact, he prefers the *coordinate* phrase to the *subordinate* phrase, that is he employs straightforward, essential, incisive declarations, abandoning the ramifications of a discourse that develops over a more complex structure. Often his affirmations can be contained in a *tweet*, squeezed into the perimeter of 140 (or 280)

characters, a bit like what often happened with Jesus and his *lóghia* (for example, his “Give to Caesar what is of Caesar and to God what is of God,” which in the original Greek of the Gospels counts more or less 50 characters). In a culture that leans on schematic essentiality, this simple, synthetic approach manages to acquire universal attention and capture followers, depriving the religious themes of the wordy rhetoric, the declamatory emphasis, the stereotyped “Church-speak.” A Hebrew saying affirmed curiously but suggestively that “a grain of pepper is worth more than a basket of watermelons.”

A second quality of the language of Pope Francis is his use of *symbol*, somewhat like Jesus who “told them nothing without a parable,” according to the Evangelist Matthew (13:34). This is a key paradigm for contemporary culture which delights in the images projected onto the television or computer screens at the expense of textual reading or ideological abstraction. Now, in its constitutive structure, the genuine symbol manages to “put together” (following the etymology of this word) concrete reality, immediate experience, daily life with the transcendent, the eternal, the infinite, the spirit. The symbols in the parables of Jesus are, here, exemplary as they start with the terrain, the plants, animals, domestic and social issues, and ascend up to the Kingdom of God (famous due to the parable that begins “The Kingdom of heaven is like ...”). Similarly, who does not know some of the images used by Pope Francis, like the “existential peripheries” or “the smell of sheep” or “the shroud has no pockets” or “corruption stinks” or the “Church going forth” or the “field hospital” or the “piecemeal third world war” and so on?

Moreover, if we look back to the Second Vatican Council, we find the appeal to recognise that the instruments of social communication “can be of great service to humanity, contributing greatly to our spiritual enrichment as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God (*Inter Mirifica* no. 2). In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI signaled in 1975 the hesitations that had caused a “split between the Gospel and culture” (no. 20), a multifaceted hiatus not only in

communications but also in the arts, in music, in culture and society generally. He was quick to warn: “The Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means” (n. 45). It is surprising to see how the technical language of the computer is curiously near to the theological one, changing some of its terms such as *icon*, *save*, *convert*, *justify*, words that belong to the Sacred Scriptures, which seem so distant in temporal and ideological terms.

So it is indispensable that we continue to elaborate a theological and pastoral reflection on communication itself in this age of the Internet and on the ways the proclamation of the Gospel can be grafted on to it. At the root, then, is the belief that the network is a “dominion” that has great spiritual potential. Research is needed to develop a pastoral grammar that communicates. This concern must involve not just the “technicians” of the digital civilization but also the ecclesial workers in their continual and constant engagement with the contemporary anthropological figure of the digital native and with the new social-networked society, and especially with the world of the young.

### **A CONCLUSION: “HUMAN NATURE”**

In this brief look at some paradigm shifts, we have mentioned the fluidity faced by *human nature*, one of the classic categories of anthropology. A sort of cultural earthquake has struck it in recent years undermining its foundations. The atmosphere is that which Max Weber adverted to in identifying the current “polytheism of values.” The consequences have been the dominance of interpretation over objective data, the primacy of subjectivity, the rule of the relative over the absolute.

The question then becomes substantially the following: In this pluralism, is it possible to recover a shared concept of “human nature” that stops us from being satisfied by simple social procedurality? To respond to this key question, we go back to look at western thought through the two great hermeneutical rivers that, despite

being full of tributaries, branches and affluents, are clearly identifiable in their journeys. The first has its ideal source in Aristotelian thought which drew on the metaphysical matrix of being to formulate the concept of human nature. The basis is objective, then, being written in the very reality of the person, and is a necessary polar star for ethics.

For centuries in philosophy and theology this dominant conception was graphically written in the mediaeval scholastic motto *Agere sequitur esse*, the ought-to-be comes from being; ontology precedes deontology. This rather unshakable manner of framing the issue was challenged during the modern era, especially when – starting with Descartes and the recognition of the importance of subjectivity (*cogito ergo sum*) – personal liberty is placed at the center. In this manner, a second river evolved with its source in Kantian thought: the matrix now is the subject’s practical reason upheld by the categorical imperative, the “you must.” To the command of “reason” – the moral law written in the conscience – is added “practice,” that is the concrete determination of the ethical contents, guided by some general norms, like the Jewish and Christian “golden rule” (“do not do to others what you would not wish done to you” and “do to others what you want others to do to you”) or the “secular” principle of not treating any person ever as a means but as an end.

After Aristotelian metaphysics had long been broken down, we then saw during the contemporary period the dissolution of Kantian universal reason notwithstanding its own “solidity.” And so we found ourselves on the soft ground where all foundations are dissolved, where “disenchantment” has wiped out all talk of values, where secularization has put moral choices into the sphere of social consent alone and its utility for the self or for the many, where multiculturalism has produced not only a religious polytheism, but also ethical pluralism. The ought-to-be that was written into being, or into the subject, was replaced by just a procedural norm, or an adhesion to the dominant customs (*mores*), i.e. existentially shared models and behavioral models that are by nature changeable.

Can we react to this outcome that leads to the current multi-branched ethical delta and recompose a new phenotype of “human nature” that keeps some of the waters of those two rivers without the rigidity of their ideological maps? Many maintain that it is possible to create a new model centered on an absolute other, the dignity of the human person, taken in the person’s relational quality. In this way, the two components of objectivity (dignity) and subjectivity (person) would be united, tied together by the relation with the neighbor, as human nature is not monadic but dialogical, not cellular but organic, not solipsistic but communion. This is the project of the personalist philosophy (we think of the contributions of Lévinas, Mounier, Ricoeur, Buber).

This is also at the basis of biblical anthropology itself, beginning with the first page of the Book of Genesis, where the divine “image” in the human creature was further explained through its being “male and female”: “God created Adam in his image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them” (*Genesis* 1:27). The transcendence present in humanity is then to be seen not so much in the soul (as would be said later especially by Christian tradition) but in the relation of love and fecund giving that unites man and woman, making them the reflection of the creator God. In this way, in a greater interpersonal space we see configured the moral, existential and religious concept of love and solidarity, joined in a delicate equilibrium with the need for justice and considered as structural for “human nature.”

Conceived this way, it recovers a series of classical ethical categories that could give substance to its coming into being. Let us try to list some. Above all the virtue of justice that is structurally *ad alterum* and that Roman law had codified into the principle *Suum cuique tribuere* (or *Unicuique suum*): to each person must be recognized a dignity that affirms his or her unicity and universality by virtue of their belonging to humanity. Along the same lines is found the Judeo-Christian culture with the Decalogue that evokes the fundamental rights of the person to religious

liberty, to life, love, honor, freedom, property. In this same perspective can be found the “golden rule.”

Moreover, the fundamental moral imperative should be built starting from a relational personal ontology, founded above all on the universal and Christian figure of the “neighbor” and on the logic of love in its reciprocity and also in its gratuity and abundance. To explain this in biblical terms known to all: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (reciprocity), but also “there is no greater love than to give your own life for the person you love” (donation). Finally, in the more complete sense, the dialogue “I – You” also contains – as the above-mentioned Ricouer suggested – a “third,” that is all humanity, even those we do not meet and do not know but belong to the shared human reality.

This is the choice that the French philosopher defined as “migrating into other people’s memories,” a particularly desired commitment from the current European historical context with its many migratory flows and the relative remixing of cultures. This is used to justify the function of a politics dedicated to building fair and solidarity-based structures for all of society. The reflection around these themes is naturally wider and more complex and open to being applied in many contexts. However, it could be founded on a simple piece of given data, that is on our most radical, universal and constant identity founded on a relationship and dialogue with the other.

In conclusion, faced with the passages we have opened up especially in the anthropological horizon, universities are called on to engage with the interrogatives that culture and contemporary society continuously pose to research. The fixed principle, however, remains the one that St. Ignatius formulated in those Spiritual Exercises we cited in opening, a work for which “there is no need to be Catholic, nor Christian, nor a believer, nor a humanist to be touched by it,” as the agnostic Roland Barthes put it in his essay *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971). St Ignatius wrote: “It is not

overflowing knowledge that satisfies the soul, but hearing and experiencing things internally.”