



# The Holy See

---

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS  
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY SESSION OF  
THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE**

*Consistory Hall  
Saturday, 18 November 2017*

---

**[Multimedia]**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I welcome you and I thank Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi for his greeting and introduction. Your Plenary Assembly has chosen the anthropological issue as its theme, intending to include prospects for future development in science and technology. Among the many available topics for discussion, you have particularly focused your attention on three subjects.

In the first place, *medicine and genetics*, which allow us to look inside the most intimate structure of the human being and to even intervene in it in order to modify it. They enable us to eradicate diseases believed until recently to be incurable; but they also open up the possibility to determine human beings by “programming in them” certain qualities, so to speak.

In the second place, *neurosciences* offer ever increasing information about the functioning of the human brain. Through this information, fundamental realities of Christian anthropology such as the soul, self-awareness and freedom now appear in an unprecedented light and can even be seriously called into question by some.

Lastly, incredible breakthroughs in *autonomous and thinking machines*, which have already in part become components of our daily lives, lead us to reflect on what is specifically human and what makes us different from machines.

All these scientific and technical developments spur some to believe that we are in a unique

moment in human history, almost at the dawn of a new era and at the birth of a new human being, superior to what we have known up to now.

The questions and issues that we are facing are indeed great and serious. They have been partly anticipated by science fiction literature and film, echoing mankind's fears and expectations. For this reason, the Church, which attentively follows the joys and hopes, the anguish and fears of today's mankind, wishes to place human persons and the questions that concern them at the centre of her own reflections.

The question regarding the human being, "what is man that thou art mindful of him?" (cf. Ps 8:5), echoes in the Bible from its very first passages and has accompanied the entire journey of Israel and of the Church. The Bible itself has offered an anthropological response to this question, a response which is already delineated in *Genesis* and spans all of Revelation, evolving around the fundamental elements of *relationship* and *freedom*. Relationship branches out according to a threefold dimension: toward matter, earth and animals; toward divine transcendence; and toward other human beings. Freedom is expressed in autonomy — naturally relative — and in moral choices. For centuries this fundamental structure has supported the thinking of most of humanity, and it continues to retain its validity today. But, at the same time, today we realize that the great principles and fundamental concepts of anthropology are often called into question also on the basis of a greater knowledge of the complexity of the human condition, and they require further in-depth examination.

Anthropology is the horizon of self-understanding in which we all operate and it also determines our concept of the world and of existential and ethical choices. In our time, it has often become a fluid, inconstant horizon, due to socio-economic changes, population displacements and the relative intercultural confrontations, but also due to the spreading global culture and, above all, to incredible scientific and technological discoveries.

How should we react to these challenges? First of all, we must express our gratitude to the men and women of science for their efforts and for their commitment in favour of humanity. This *appreciation for the sciences*, which we have not always been able to demonstrate, finds its ultimate foundation in the plan of God who "chose us before the creation of the world and destined us to be his adoptive children" (cf. Eph 1:4-5), and who entrusted us with the care of creation: "to till and keep" the earth (cf. Gen 2:15). Precisely because man is the image and likeness of God who created the world through love, the safekeeping of the whole of creation must follow the rationale of gratuitousness and love, of service, and not that of dominion and abuse.

Science and technology have helped us to broaden the confines of our knowledge of nature and, in particular, of the human being. But they alone are not enough to provide all the answers. Today we are increasingly aware that it is necessary to draw from the treasures of wisdom preserved in religious traditions, from popular wisdom, from literature and the arts, which touch the depths of

the mystery of the human being, without forgetting, indeed rediscovering, those contained in philosophy and in theology.

As I wished to affirm in the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*: “We urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge [...] in the service of a more integral and integrating vision” (n. 141), so as to overcome the tragic division between the “two cultures” — the humanistic-literary-theological culture and the scientific one — which leads to mutual impoverishment, and in order to encourage a greater dialogue even among the Church, the community of believers, and the scientific community.

The Church, for her part, offers several great principles to support this dialogue. The first is *the centrality of the human person*, which should be considered an end and not a means. The person must be placed in harmonious relation with creation, therefore, not as a despot over God’s legacy, but as a loving guardian of the work of the Creator.

The second principle that is essential to remember is that of the *universal destination of goods*, which also concerns the goods of knowledge and technology. Scientific and technological progress serves the good of all humanity and its benefits cannot inure to the benefit of only the few. This will prevent the future from adding new forms of knowledge-based inequality and increasing the gap between rich and poor. The big decisions concerning the direction of scientific research and investment therein must be undertaken by society as a whole, and not dictated solely by the rules of the market or by the interests of the few.

Lastly, the principle that *not everything that is technically possible or viable is thereby ethically acceptable* remains ever valid. Science, as any other human activity, knows that it has limitations to respect for the good of humanity itself, and that it needs a sense of ethical responsibility. The true measure of progress, as Blessed *Paul vi* recalled, is that which seeks the good of each man and of the whole man.

I thank all of you, Members, Consultors and Collaborators of the Pontifical Council for Culture, because you perform a valuable service. I invoke upon you an abundance of the Lord’s blessings, and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.