"Educating and evangelizing today in the digital habitat. Together with young people, toward the future": Part Three

Continuing the publication of the new series of articles by Fr. Gildasio Mendes, General Councilor for Social Communication, on the theme "Educating and Evangelizing Today in the Digital Habitat. Together with young people, toward the future," the third contribution is presented today, which aims to explore the important challenges emerging in this new digital landscape.

As I pointed out in the second part of the series "Educating and Evangelizing Today in the Digital Habitat. Together with Young People, toward the Future," we will see that major challenges emerge in this new digital landscape. The big challenge is the fact that technology is not neutral. Why isn’t it neutral? Because the virtual emerges and grows within the complex universe of the system of capital, politics, the different ideologies of groups, of the dominance of corporations that with their capital and research have control over the structure, organization, and content of the Internet and social networks.

In addition, everything is connected in the complex system of the digital: the technological, economic system, health, education, security, the conflict of interest between the State and Corporations.

In this context, the question of ethics is fundamental. Technology is born and developed within capital and finance. The great divide between developed nations and those in extreme poverty necessarily leads to issues of human rights, of the great conflict between the individual and the system.

As I pointed out in the first text, technology and the digital are fundamental to human growth and development of humanity. For this reason, it is supremely important to understand the development of the digital within the fabric of society and culture and to understand how the digital touch the way we learn, relate, work, and live.

If this complexity were not enough, we are entering a time when artificial intelligence takes on a new and important role within the digital scenario. This is a complex issue, but important for us to understand and interpret this phenomenon that is and will be part of our life well.

It is always good to remember that when we talk about evangelizing and educating in the digital habitat, we are entering a complex theme, considering that digital communication is part of the world of cultural diversity. In this context, we also need to delve into some aspects of the dimension of time and space in the digital and, hence, the dimension of the human and the relationship of the human with the reality of the other, with nature, with culture.

More recently, artificial intelligence has opened up new horizons of the person's relationship with technology. Some authors reflect on the urgent need for an ethics for artificial intelligence.

This issue is increasingly becoming a topic of discussion and reflection, of concern and urgency, so much so that UNESCO has drawn up a text on ethics and artificial intelligence.

Artificial intelligence does indeed affect the time-space relationship and a person's capacity for decision-making and freedom. There are also many questions about the psychological, social, and moral consequences resulting from the relationship between person and technology, or what concerns the field of work that will be progressively accomplished by robots.

Furthermore, in a planetary context, there are basic discussions involving the human and natural ecosystem and its relationship with the human person and technology. This means that the digital issue cannot be thought of outside human development and its relationship with ecology.

In this context, the discussion on the Anthropocene, transhumanism and post-humanism becomes very important in the present and the future. On this issue, as we said before, there are various points of view.

But the key issue, rather than simply determining that humanism has been overcome and that we are entering a new era - post-humanism, where technology will help us solve the great problems of humanity -, is to humanize and find an ethics for the relationship between the human person and technology, care for Creation, dignity and human rights, renew the economy and politics, safeguard the Common Home, foster fraternity and cooperation, technology and integral ecology as Pope Francis has proposed starting with Laudato Sì and the Global Educational Pact.

A current thinker such as José Manuel de Cózar proposes a systemic and integrated vision when talking about this complex moment in which technology, society, and planet converge, and presents the implications of the Anthropocene for the human species.

The principal idea behind the term Anthropocene is that human activity has reached such a level that its influence on the planet is similar to powerful geological forces and agents, such as volcanic activity and erosion caused by water.

When we perceive this new situation, the old ways of understanding our relationship with the Earth are called into question. Human dynamics cannot – in a clear fashion - be separated from natural ones.

The human footprint on the planet is already irreversible and global, although each person's responsibility may be very different when it comes to seeing what negative impacts we are causing.

Thus, we have a fundamental task for researchers and scholars in the various sciences: that of finding a common center for dialogue and establishing an ethics for technology and information and the digital, so that this reality is placed within a vision of integral development, and not just a vision of capital and profit.

In this sense, the thinker Paolo Benante clearly states: “In the relationship between human being and machine, the real connoisseur and bearer of value is the human part. Human dignity and human rights tell us that it is the human being who must be protected in the relationship between human being and machine."

Therefore, rethinking the human requires a broader interdisciplinary study so that a path can be found to integrate technology and the digital into the education of future generations.

It is not my objective in this short article to present an epistemology for a dialogue of the digital with the human, that is, to rethink the human starting from neuroscience or artificial intelligence.

I only wish to open a window that allows us to broaden our view of the digital in the context of major technological transformations, keeping the human person as the protagonist.

My premise, to develop this idea of which I am very convinced, is to think of the digital starting from the cultural and ritual dimensions of media.

Think, for example, of how disease is associated with human reality. War is a political phenomenon of conflict between nations. Love is an expression of a profound human feeling. The body speaks and is part of the reality of the human being. Death is an expression of anthropological reality.  All of this is part of the human condition, the culture where we live, our way of being and living in the digital world.

In Part IV of this series, I would like to present this topic to you, trying to offer a broader view of the digital, highlighting that the Internet, for example, is not just a technological-digital space and that the human relationship in social networks touches something deeper in the human person.