presentation on "The Pastoral Impact of Artificial Intelligence" by

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With artificial intelligence, it seems, machines now have a mind of their own, potentially more powerful than the ones we have – a prospect both fascinating and frightening.

The "intelligence" of machines may be simply advanced computer programming. But that does have its advantages over our feeble minds! Machines don't get tired or distracted. Their presumed learning can be applied in faster, broader, and more efficient ways. And, if our intelligence builds on the knowledge of others, then AI can draw upon more sources that we can search on our own, and do so in a more focused way than our wondering (and wandering) minds can.
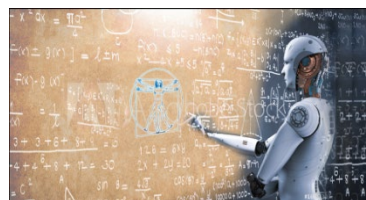
Already AI performs tasks that normally require human intelligence:

- Cars drive themselves.
- Medical devices predict health risks.
- Computers see images and caption them.
- Language processors answer questions and write papers. (No, not this one!)
- And, of course, Siri and Alexa actually speak to us.

"The Future of Us" – as Oprah and her guests might say later this week – may well be determined by what machines learn and do for us … or even without us.

Will that impact pastoral ministry?

Well, it already has … and in positive ways!

- As a communications tool, AI reaches a broader audience than any pastor can, including those unable or uninterested in going to church.

- As a management mechanism, AI automates office processes, shares data across systems, and streamlines workflows, thereby enhancing efficiency and effectiveness.

- And as an information source, AI provides a more personalized response to people's searching, offering real-time answers to people's specific questions without waiting for the pastor to get back to them. (Just ask CatéGPT a catechetical question, or check Magisterium AI for church teaching, or discuss something online at Catholic.chat.)

But what AI portends for the future of pastoral ministry depends greatly on our own discernment, as Pope Francis reminds us in this year's Message for World Communications Day.

On the one hand, relying on AI does pose a great temptation, which the pope describes as trying "to become like God without God."

Will we, because of that, decide to avoid it? Or will we learn more about it? If we don't engage with it, I submit, if we do not become familiar with how it works, we will be left behind (in terms of our own abilities) and will risk leaving behind the people who know how to dwell in our technological world.

On the other hand, using AI can greatly benefit our ministry … as long as we don't let it replace us.

As an example, one young priest you all know experimented with ChaptGPT to craft a homily. When I asked how it turned out, he said, "it's accurate information, but kind of bland and impersonal," then added, "but it's probably better than most people will hear this weekend!"

Our new Catholic Preaching Institute aims to change that impression! In the meantime, AI can help with research. But if we let AI do the preaching for us, then we are abdicating the primary duty of our vocation.

That's why the pope concludes his message by saying, "It is up to us to decide whether we will become fodder for algorithms or will nourish our hearts with that freedom without which we cannot grow in wisdom."

And that's why another Francis – the saintly Doctor of Salesian Spirituality – reminds us, in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, that holiness requires a "well-balanced and reasonable mind."

> "Reason," he writes, "is the special characteristic of (humans), and yet it is a rare thing to find really reasonable (people)." The cause of this rarity, in his view, is the self-love, which "hinders reason" and "beguiles us insensibly into all manner of trifling" as well as "dangerous acts of injustice and untruth."

Today, AI can beguile us even more with technological wizardry. With its increasing power to create, modify, and control all manner of things, it makes it increasingly difficult to determine what is real and what is not, what is actually true and what is artificially intelligent. That's why it is even more critical nowadays to have a "well-balanced and reasonable mind," one that goes beyond information processing and machine programming.

Real intelligence is cultivated through thought, study, meditation, and contemplation. It unites us to Wisdom itself by way of an appreciation of the truth, beauty, and goodness of God.

For pastors, now and in the future, that spiritual intelligence will never be artificial, if we approach what we do not with a practical concern for more efficient workflows, but with the unending desire to share the Good News of salvation with the people to and for whom we minister.

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