"FOR A TECHNOLOGY WITH A HUMAN FACE"

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1. Eschatological hope and technological progress

While the encyclicals of John XXIII appear above all as ethic-political appeal to men of good will, *Gaudium et S*pes, in the context of the "pastoral" theme of the encounter between Church and the contemporary world, for the first time proposes at the magisterial level a theological synthesis of a certain commitment about the meaning of human progress, characterised by technology, in the prospective of the history of salvation.

Regarding the technological progress, first of all, it is said that there is "a monumental effort of man through the centuries to improve the conditions of life" (n.34), and a positive ethical evaluation is given about it, that draws its arguments from the Old Testament texts, especially Genesis c. 1 and 2, the texts that refer to the cosmic primacy of man, the "image of God". Moreover it specifies the criterion for such a progress consistent with the genuine *humani generis bono* (n. 35). Later, the theme of ambiguity of fact inscribed within the development is introduced – not only from ethical prospective alone, but also from historic-hermeneutical – (n.37, history infected by sin); only through this way one has access to the christian paschal (n.38) and eschatological (n.39, new heaven and new earth) prospective. Here, a very cautious and uncertain important affirmation is made, "…far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectation of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come. That is why, although we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the growth of the kingdom of God, however, such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God".

"The human activity in the world" is briefly described in its historic manner as increased scientific-technical "dominion" upon nature and is approved as in accordance with the "plan of God", in opposition to the accusation made against the christian message, that of "turning away men from the task of building up the world" (nn.33-39).

Even though the "vital concern" of civil progress for the kingdom of God remain undetermined, *GS* develops an interesting anthropological, humanistic and cultural approach that allows to verify with greater precision the negative and positive aspects of technology (n.54).

Recognising that science and technology open new frontiers, contribute to improve life and to spread culture, *GS* underlines the difference from human values. Therefore it indicates a search for an equilibrium between techno-scientific development and human-cultural values, as one of the important tasks of the contemporary culture (n.56).

2. A challenge for social theology

The dominion of the technological culture in the accustomed and more immediate ambient of life makes man attend much more to historical questions than to eternal questions. We see how the ultimate horizon of human life cannot in any way be constituted from history, understood as that collective and progressive event of humanity, but it ought to be constituted from the truth of man. However, the humanity of man is not "the result" of the social conditions of his life; the freedom of man, in particular, is not "the result" of liberation or of emancipation by technology.

The foundation of ethical values beyond every reference to objective realizations of civil history, far from being an impediment to the socio-historical responsibility of man, is the condition. This foundation leads to the ascertainment of a nature insuperably partial, conjectural and in the end also ambiguous of every civil realization, always suspended in its justification from the total fulfillment of the collective plan.

The objective is a social theology which is not superimposed, but connects intrinsically and structurally to socio-cultural relationships, reinterpreting them without deteriorating into allegories, as gratuitous as unproductive for the critical discernment of technological facts. Such a project integrates the fragments in the direction of eschatological hope, as well as in the awareness of the permanent difference between such hope and every possible social realization. Theology does not use the eschatological reference in a purely negative critical sense, but develops the positive and creative aspect of the Christian eschatological tension, when it refers to ethico-social themes such as technology.

The first theological certainty which one needs to recall is that the salvation of man – or the ultimate good of man – is not the result of human effort, and even less of the collective activity of progress. This human activity, as all others, must be placed under the sign of faith and of obedience: obedience to the fundamental commandment, upon which every ethical norm turns, and that is to the commandment to love every person as neighbor.

The human activity of love, on one hand, is an activity permanently obliged to accept the limit: the good that can be willed by man and for man is good conditioned in many modes. Conditioned, in the sense that it is never the good in its fullness, but that it is given only in a constellation of goods, which as such are proposed within a determined historical situation, manifold and scattered, and which from the same situation their material positivity and the limit derive. Here the finality of our plans questions the meaning of our technological possibilities: the limit is not only a casual obstacle to overcome, but it is also a sign of a condition of reality which demands respect.

The industrial technological cultures, where liberty is reduced to only [is no more than] liberation from necessity, summon theology to a serious discussion about transcendence: the “transcending without end” is not transcendence. In reality, the finite existence of man and of his activity is given beginning with himself, is given but not as self-reference, but as a tension toward a goal which fulfills the desire, toward an actualization which constitutes an end and a fullness. Nevertheless, if infinity qualifies the desire, which goes beyond all boundaries, it does not make infinite that which is given as finite.

The auto-affirmation of the desire of life of man, which is manifested in progress, is always of a symbolic character. As in every particular desire, a more radical and ineffable desire is simultaneously announced and hidden, a desire which cannot be defined conceptually nor even less realized practically, but it can only be partially and fragmentarily represented by concrete figures of historical-practical experience, believing and hoping in the completed revelation of it and the realization on the part of the faithful love of God toward his creature.

Because of the strict relationship between the subject and technology it is also necessary to raise this last from a simple notion of utility and to lift it to the essential part of the human person and his realization. Technology would be, then, an expression of the human spirit, and not simply a “remedy” for his biological insufficiency, as A. Gelden affirms. Through this man expresses his radical desire to realize

himself, to become a person, to become a subject who can be free. It belongs to the dynamic of man's realization which is open to overcoming every limit and receptive of a sense of reality and of its technological transformation. This sense of realty goes beyond human activity itself.

The social teaching of the Church stimulates forms of knowledge and discourse which open certain cultural avenues, introducing a transcendent point of view; by contrast, the technological culture risks becoming a system of signs which point only to itself.

3. A symbolic interpretation of technology.

The technology is lived, in fact, as one of the major processes of invisible and pervasive liberation from the limiting conditions of man. Because of its success in all fields, today it is the living symbol of the concept of progress and liberation. From this point of view, the technology proposes itself as a good in terms of ability to liberate us from many physical bondages, and thanks to the technology, through which today the health conditions of contemporary man has reached unimaginable levels. These prospectives touch profoundly the desires of each person: the desire for a healthy life without limits, truly empowering in a strongly ageing society. The exhilaration for these discoveries and for the realisable dreams is spreading the desire for a society without suffering, without unbearable burdens, entrusted to progress (E. PARENS 1998). Understood as a project of liberation from all limits, what consequences does the technological development have upon the project of human self-representation ? Can such a possibility become in itself legitimised, and is each limit encountered, presented as an obstacle to overcome?

To these questions, the authoritative response of GS focalises both the problem of the truth of human project and the resultant determinations of the characteristics of technological progress. On the basis of the anthropological presuppositions inspired by christian faith, it examines the possibility to re-orient the technology so as to be at the service of man and remain as a sign of that good which is the organic principle and justifier of the great undertaking. Such a foundation does not need the technological process to unfold totally to justify itself, but comes first and gives not partial significance to the human undertaking (A. PESSINA 2001). The technique, as far as a human activity goes, refers not just to an instrumental meaning alone. Such a meaning engages as well as makes man capable of evaluating his own praxis within the complex category of good that transcends (but also includes and judges), that which is useful or damaging, and helps to recompose the unity of reality (n.57).

This is to explain the "symbolic" dimension of the cultural and technological context, as far as it is a mediation of meaning, given and not built up, and an appeal to the human freedom, in order to discover and recognise the meaning that precedes it (G. MARCEL 1962). The technological function is acculturated, taking into consideration not only the finalities of the subject, but also of the objects, and fosters the peculiarity of their being. The inspiring line of a renewed technological culture should take into consideration the "symbolic" conscience that understands the structure of being as ultimately relational and the links of every being within the whole (S.WEIL 1980). The logic that emerges is, that which is capable of unfolding towards the recognition of "limits", and in the "measure" that distinguishes as well as it unites, and unites while distinguishing. The technological action, above all, becomes attentive to the radical connectedness and to the constitutive relations, to reciprocity and unification of various meanings. Without the symbolic dimension, the technology which cannot not be a field of a total openess, becomes a whole closed in upon itself. Its self-openness to being reduces itself to an enclosure, that functions to conceal itself from other possible ways of disclosing the being. The technology thus becomes a check that makes of itself and to us, unavailable to the other. In such a way, the internet, instead of symbolic totality of the world, can offer a simulated world of totality, a closed reference of immediacy and transparency (R.KRAUT 1998).

The "symbolic" dimension allows us to maintain externality to the omnipresence of technological environments, and at the same time explicates the authentically human dimension, that the technology can express and facilitate, impede and deny. It also illustrates the possibility that the christian faith influences the whole human space, opens it to the divine and realises it by disclosing it. Thus, the technology can fulfil its noble and almost priestly task of safeguarding the work of the Creator and revealing its beauty. It does not reduce itself to just a useful instrument, but becomes an essential part of the human person and his realisation. However, technology could be an expression of the human spirit, and not simply a "remedy" for

biological insufficiency, as Gehlen affirms (A. GEHLEN 1983). Through it, man expresses his basic desire for self-realisation, to become a person, to become a subject that can actualise himself (n.15). It belongs to the dynamic of self-realisation of man, open to the overcoming every type of limit and receptive of a meaning of reality and its technological transformation, a meaning that exceeds the work of man himself (n.39).

Above all the theological interpretation does a service to technology rather than dominates it, because it indicates the spiritual and ethical values that make technology a means of liberation and a hope for the human family in a dynamic not bound to mere earthly happiness with its traits of a secular religion but open towards the hope of eschatological fulfilment of human endeavours (n. 34).

4. The impact of technological developments

The impact of technological developments is particularly important under the anthropological and socio-political profiles. Under the first profile, as the biomedical enhancement technologies illustrate, it is a specific aspect of a human condition and one of the features of its praxis: the binomial of the possible and of the limit. If the question why the world exists is not substituted by the question how the environment around us functions, then it is possible to measure, from time to time, which limits are recognized as obstacles and which ones are recognised as morally important for the constitution of the human being. The ambivalence of techniques is tightly connected to the truth of the human plan, the truth that is of its own condition (n. 35). By introducing a transcendent point of view, it derives a form of civilisation which underlines not only the features of the techniques oriented to control, but also other compatible attributes with the integral development of the person, with a broader distribution of cultural and power qualifications (R. GUARDINI 1983). Such attributes include vocational investments of the subjects in their work, collegial forms of self-organisation and integration of a wide range of values into the techniques, beyond the pursuit of profit and power. Today these dimensions of techniques can be put into play only in the context of the cultural re-organisation of advanced societies (P. GOIYON - H. DUBREUIL 2001).

It is important to avoid the limits of the instrumental vision of technology (a tool is only a tool) and the excesses of the deterministic approach of technological development. To the first approach is noted how every technological product expresses always a vision of life and a hierarchy of values. To the second is noted the contingency: the technologies represent complex and frequently contradictory political decisions, even if it is yet possible to maintain a human interest in efficiency and in power of productivity.

The critical vision of technology focusses the contextual aspects of technology that are ignored by the dominant vision. Technology is not the rational control of nature, its development and impact are intrinsically social. As such the traditional trust of efficiency as a criterion of technological development is relativized and ample possibilities for change are opened.

The deterministic theories such as those of Heidegger and of Ellul, according to which we become objects of technology, incorporated in the mechanism that we have created, invoke a vague spiritual renewal, too vague to inform a new practical technology.

Their weak point remains the identification of technology in general with the specific technologies of conquest in the last century. These claim an unprecedented autonomy and their eruptions and social impacts remain hidden: they are a particular feature of our society and not a universal dimension of modernity.

The technologies are under-determined by scientific and technical criteria. This means that there is generally a surplus of feasible solutions for every problem and that the social actors make a choice between

various technical options, and that the definition of the problem frequently changes in the course of the solution.

The technologies are not neutral because the social ends and the institutional interests are within the technical projects that are selected. Because there are choices, the decisions of public strategies around technology play a significant role. Technology must be seen, therefore, as an ambiguous tool of social power. There is not a better way to project a technology. Different individuals and groups can define a problem in different ways and can have different criteria for success.

The technological system remains flexible and can be adapted to a variety of social requirements: technology is a socially dependent variable, although always more important, and it is not the criterion of judgement of history. It follows from this that technological research must be guided by two other principles: I) technological development is not linear but branches out in many directions and could reach the highest levels in more than one direction; II) technological development is not determinant for society but is determined by technical and social factors.

If technology has many unexplored potentialities, no technological imperative dictates the current social hierarchy. Technology is, rather, one scenario of social conflicts, in which cultural alternatives struggle. The differences in the way in which social groups interpret and use the objects of technology are not only extrinsic, but they differentiate the nature of the interests themselves. What the object is for the group that ultimately decides its destiny determines what it becomes, how it is re-designed and improved in time. Then we can understand technological developments only by studying the socio-political situation of the various groups involved in it.

However, the act of choosing remains hidden, the deterministic image of a technically justified social order is projected.

The legitimating effect of technology does not depends on the knowledge of the cultural and political horizon under which it has been designed. A critique of technology which puts it in the context can discover that horizon, demystify the illusion of technological necessity and expose the relativity of prevalent technical choices.

Only a democracy with decentralized power, which transfers responsibility to those upon whose wise exercise of it depends its survival, can correct the equilibrium in favor of persons who battle to conquer control of the technological machine.

Under the socio-political profile and from a conscious position of non-neutrality of technology towards the values and the political and economic interests that control the resources, the question of which technologies ought to be developed and for which ends, becomes the question of interest for every democracy. How can the opportunities that technology offers be increased so that they contribute to the participation in and to the construction of the common good? To have technology reformed and re-designed, there must be a democratic policy, which builds up a synergetic totality of natural, human and environmental elements without diminishing the efficiency of productivity (A. FEENBERG - H. HANNAY 1995).

5. The concern of freedom and of justice.

Beyond the individualistic-ethical approach, and also in service to such an approach, the Church proposes the inquiry about the institutional forms that better permit the control of the power of technological development and the just distribution of its benefits. The critic of technological civilisation, elaborated from the conscience point of view, permits to spotlight a political plan that is not hastily agreed upon in the vision of efficiency, but responds to the demand for the quality of human life that our civilisation produces (A. GRUNWALD - S. SAUPE 1999). For that reason the Church is sensitive to the implications that technological development has on justice, specially towards the persons and groups that are not represented: " Likewise all that men accomplish within the scope of achieving a greater justice, a more wider fraternity and a more human order in social relations, has more value than the technical progress" (n. 35).

The religious vision of *Gaudium et spes* arouses problems of a wider horizon. One of its contributions is to offer greater structures of understanding and of commitment necessary for dealing with complex problems. It offers perspectives in which persons are responsible, beyond their own interests, towards the ultimate source of their lives' foundation. It emphasizes a need of science and technology with the purpose to serve the common good and for the realisation of a more inclusive human society (E. DAVIS 2000).

The Church, "expert in humanity", stimulates a confrontation that is capable of changing worries for social justice, by transforming them into a greater impetus of planning and of intervention, and by seizing the positive opportunities that the technologies offer for the "good" that is superior to every definite historical and material objective; the good that is given in the witnessing of immediate and of the concern for the destiny of the other. The interest of the Church is that of making to grow a more lively conscience of the good that is the original foundation of every human enterprise and precedes it as guarantee, in advance, of the possibility of fulfilling the technological work. By contextualizing the announcement of salvation in the technological culture and making clear the transcendent meaning of the human activity in the technological systems, the Church offers an original and indispensable confrontation between the understanding of epoch-making phenomena and the planning of technology from the human perspective.

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