

# The Place of Artificial Intelligence in Catholic Social Teachings After Vatican II: An Ethical Approach

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**Abstract:** Since its foundation, as depicted in its various documents, the mission of the Roman Catholic Church has remained the preaching of the Gospel message, commonly referred to as evangelization. Throughout history, this endeavor has been facilitated by many means of communication, including television channels, newspapers, social media, and, more recently, by different forms of artificial intelligence. In line with this, this research proposes to explore the place of artificial intelligence in the Social Teachings of the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Council of Vatican. Exploring numerous important documents of this Christian community, such as the decree on social media *Inter Mirifica*, and the declaration on Christian education *Gravissimum Educationis*, this paper notes that the Roman Catholic Church, especially after Vatican II, always promotes an ethical use of new forms of technologies for the welfare of humankind and for the sake of evangelization. In the context of Catholic Social Teachings, as argued in the documents mentioned above and many others still to be explored, it can be posited that the place of artificial intelligence intersects with universal moral principles. Hence, as it explores the Roman Catholic Church's viewpoint regarding the use of intelligent machines, this paper does not disregard other authoritative voices in the field of ethics. Using the Church as a case study, it proposes to expand preexisting knowledge about artificial intelligence and its use for the common good.

**Keywords:** *Vatican II, Common Good, Ethical Community, Artificial Intelligence, Social Communication*

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## 1. Introduction

Whether understood as a scientific field of research or merely as a technological invention, artificial intelligence embraces all aspects of existence and remains one of the most complex research topics. This study proposes to explore this field through the light of the Social Teachings of the Catholic Church (STCs). It strives to comprehend the following question: what is the place of artificial intelligence in the Teachings of the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II? Before exploring this question, let us first situate this Church Council in its historical context. Church historians report that these ecumenical gatherings took place in four sessions in Rome from 11 October 1962 to 8 December 1965 under the supervision of Pope John XXIII. After the two World Wars and the independence movements mostly in Africa, it was obvious that the world was rapidly moving towards numerous changes. There was an urgent need to find ways of adjusting the Teachings of the

Church, without endangering the Doctrine, to the modern world. This is the main reason for which the Pope convened the aforementioned summits. Three categories of documents; constitutions, declarations, and decrees, were produced by the participants. Referred to as Apostolic Constitutions, the first category includes *Dei Verbum*; *Lumen Gentium*; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*; *Gaudium et Spes*. The second group comprises three documents called Apostolic Declarations. Alphabetically, they are classified as follows: *Dignitatis Humanae*, *Gravissimum Educationis*; *Nostra Aetate*. The last group is composed of nine Apostolic Decrees titled: *Ad Gentes*; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*; *Optatam Totius*; *Perfectae Caritatis*; *Christus Dominus*; *Unitatis Redintegration*; *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*; *Inter Mirifica*. The common purpose of all these Social Teachings is to facilitate the Church's involvement in a world characterized by explosions of new ideologies. Funded following the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Roman Catholic Church step by step grew into a large international community. History accounts that shortly after the death of Jesus Christ, the Church endured persecution moments and many of its members were forced into exile. This forced migration, though evil and traumatic, contributed to the expansion of the Gospel message mostly in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Though the Church conserves its doctrine throughout the centuries; it does not hesitate to use good tools that science and various cultural heritages offer humankind. As an ecumenical council, Vatican II dealt with issues concerning the Roman Catholic Church, the entire Christian community, and humanity in general. The STCs function as ethical guidelines not only for issues discussed by the council members but also for current and future matters related to the Common Good of humanity. Consequently, the topic of artificial intelligence can also be explored through the lenses of the Social Teachings of the Roman Catholic Church as argued in the following sections.

## 2. Literature Review

Artificial intelligence, as noted by many scholars, is one of the most complex scientific concepts that remains hard to confine into a clear definition. Nonetheless, multiple clues of understanding can be found in many literary works produced by writers from various fields of research. For instance, Bettina Berendt argues that "Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings" (2019, p.49). She further notes that artificial intelligence is more than a merely robotic process performed by sophisticated computer programs. The notion of artificial intelligence refers also to a field of study which, as she puts it, crisscrosses science and engineering. Though this description remains acceptable, it cannot be used to define every form of artificial intelligence. The limitlessness of this field of research referred to as artificial intelligence makes it almost impossible for scholars to agree on any sort of definition. This is the reason why many writers prefer to describe rather than define the concept of artificial intelligence. The issue of definition is well stated by Stamova and Draganov (2020) who, in a co-authored article, found out that "Although the concept of artificial intelligence has been the subject of research for decades, there is still no single and universal definition. The Association for the Development of Artificial Intelligence views AI as the scientific understanding of the mechanisms underlying thinking and intelligent behavior and their application in machines" (p.2). Even though the scientific community has not yet coined a canonical definition, several insightful works can enable us to understand the all-encompassing notion of artificial intelligence. Some of these literary works, as illustrated in Jonathan Shaw's article (2019), highlight the necessity of exploring the topic of artificial intelligence through the lens of ethics and morals. Though, on one side, he endorses the use of AIs for the Common Good; on the other side, he reminds all AI makers and users that human inventions cannot make ethical decisions. With these considerations in mind,

Shaw further argues that “The fragility of current AI systems stands in stark contrast to human intelligence, which is robust—capable of learning something in one context and swiftly applying it to another... AI lacks common sense and the ability to reason—even if it can also make incredible discoveries” (Shaw, 2019, p.3). Likewise, concerning the ethical use of AIs, scholars such as Josh Cowls, Andreas Tsamados, Mariarosaria Taddeo, and Luciano Floridi invite all consumers to avoid using these so-called intelligent apparatuses without a proper understanding of their *terminus ad quem*. This group of scholars has also requested all makers of automated machines, for the sake of scientific integrity, to kindly provide full information about both the advantages and limitations of their products. Unfortunately, in many cases, consumers are not provided with proper information – “the ethical and social guardrails around applications of AI that are explicitly geared towards socially good outcomes are only partially defined” (Cowls et al., 2021, p.1). Another danger related to the concealment of information in the domain of AI is referred to by a group of scholars, including Robert Geraci and Berth Singler, as apocalyptic discourse. They not only tend to disregard Christian philosophy which posits God as the Universal Principle that controls the entire universe but also argue that the future of humankind can be enhanced only through technology and science. Geraci summarized the apocalyptic discourse as follows: “Even without God, evolution guarantees the coming of the Kingdom. Apocalyptic AI looks forward to a mechanical future in which human beings will upload their minds into machines and enjoy a virtual reality paradise in perfect virtual bodies” (Geraci, 2008, p.140). To better understand the word apocalypse, Singler decided to explore its semantic evolution through the lenses of trendy literary works and religious texts from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Formulating her findings in the form of an exhortation, she reminds researchers that the concept of “*apocalypse* in the classic sense also includes utopian hopes, often for a select minority defined by the speakers. For the early Christians, the apocalypse contained hope for an end to alienation and suffering” (Singler, 2019, p.157). Taking into consideration the multiplicity of viewpoints among scholars, especially those quoted in previous lines, this study argues that artificial intelligence whether referred to as a field of research or as an all-encompassing concept connoting for all kinds of automated machines, remains an ideal that human mind still strives to comprehend. It is in this context characterized by scientific uncertainty that the Social Teachings of the Roman Catholic Church assume, as argued in the theoretical framework, two important roles. On one side, it underlines the necessity of ethics in scientific discoveries. On the other hand, it decolonizes humankind from technological imperialism.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

As mentioned in the introductory section, this research explores the place of artificial intelligence in the Social Teachings of the Catholic Church after Vatican II. Taking into consideration both the benefits and the possible risks associated with the use of AIs, it proposes an ethical approach for the sake of promoting the idea of the Common Good. Since scientific and technological discoveries affect the lives of all human beings, this work opts to ground itself upon the theory of John Charvet which intersects Christian ethics with other philosophical viewpoints that promote the notion of common good. This British political theorist argues that “The fundamental theoretical problem of ethical life concerns the necessary authoritative nature of the shared norms. This authority has been thought to derive from the existence of a world of value independent of human beings, a world we aspire to realize in our individual and collective lives because of our natural desire to seek the good” (Charvet, 1995, p.1). He further notes that for Christians the notion of good connotes the existence of God while in Plato’s philosophy, it can be used interchangeably with the notion of realm of ideas. By intersecting various philosophical viewpoints such as Christianity which posits God as the

ultimate source of all good actions and Plato's allegory of the cave which postulates goodness as a category of the realm of ideas, Charvet argues that ethical norms are guidelines intended to lead humanity towards the actualization of what he refers to as an ethical community. The Social Teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, in a certain way, suggest a similar standpoint regarding the ongoing relationship between humans and artificial intelligence or any other form of scientific invention. Utilizing the argument of Charvet as its theoretical framework, this research endorses the idea of an ethical society by exploring three STCs.

#### 4. Discussion and Findings

The Social Teachings of the Roman Catholic Church can be referred to as a body of knowledge that not only portrays the history of missiological activities but also proposes new perspectives that enable the Church to maintain its relevancy in a world characterized by rapid and sudden changes. The Second Council of the Vatican, as detailed in the introductory section of this research, classifies the Social Teachings of the Church into three categories of documents. All, including their ranking can be accessed on the official website of the Holy See [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). They are composed of four *Constitutions* (highest ranking), three *Declarations* (second in ranking), and nine *Decrees* (third in ranking). The term 'ranking' refers to their authoritative values within the Social Teachings of the Church. Nevertheless, ranking is not always the most substantial thing about these materials. It is rather their interaction with the world at large that counts most. It is important to keep in mind that the Social Teachings of the Church can also be found in pre-Vatican II documents as well as in various other documents such as publications by Catholic theologians, pastoral letters from episcopal conferences, academic researchers directed by departments of Catholic studies, papal encyclical letters, etc. The list of these documents remains inexhaustible since the Church's interaction with the world remains both a temporal and an eschatological endeavor. Consequently, any study that intends to explore all materials related to the Social Teachings of the Church remains an impossible mission. Nonetheless, three documents from Vatican II publications have been randomly selected and posited as depictions of what academic works from Catholic scholars, mostly theologians, refer to as the Social Teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Let us now delve into the selected STCs beginning with *Gaudium et Spes*; one of the most cited Pastoral Constitutions of Vatican II. This document provides guidelines regarding the work of the Church in the modern world. Its first article, which functions as an introductory statement, is stated as follows: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs, and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts" (Vatican II, 1965b, art.1). This research interprets the spirit behind that introductory statement by focusing on key concepts such as hope, this age, and anxiety. These three concepts studied together depict, in a certain way, the work of the Church which consists of providing moral guidelines for people in this modern world characterized by speedy changes, short-lived joys and unexpected moments of anxieties. With this insight in mind, we may now proceed with the second selected STC – the *Gravissimum Educationis* which is one of the most important pastoral Declarations of Vatican II. In its introduction, it emphasizes the necessity for all human beings to receive a good education grounded in solid moral values. Furthermore, *Gravissimum Educationis* encourages Catholic schools to supplement their curricula with courses related to Biblical values since the primary goal of Christian education remains the proclamation of the Kenosis mystery manifested in Jesus Christ. The concept Kenosis etymologically derives from Greek. Its use in Christian theology denotes Jesus' self-emptying of his Divine Rank by assuming our human nature as argued by Saint Paul in his famous letter to the

Philippians (Phil 2:6-7). All Christian Churches confess this incarnation of Jesus Christ as *sumum bonum* through which life in its fulness can be granted to humanity. Aware that God uses multiple ways to bring humankind towards the attainment of that fulness of life, the STCs still encourages Catholic schools to make good use of all the benefits that scientific discoveries may offer.

The pastoral *Declaration Gravissimum Educationis* states it as follow: “The Church esteems highly and seeks to penetrate and ennoble with her own spirit also other aids which belong to the general heritage of man and which are of great influence in forming souls and molding men, such as the media of communication” (Vatican II, 1965a, art.17). Having been enlightened by this STC, we may now proceed with the last selected document – *Inter Mirifica* – which is one of the key Pastoral Decrees that characterize the spirit of Vatican II. Promulgated by Pope Paul VI on the 4th day of December 1963, it endorses the recommendations made in *Gravissimum Educationis* by postulating the media of social communication as highly profitable for the Church’s missiological endeavor in the world. *Inter Mirifica*’s second article explicitly states that “The Church recognizes that these media, if properly utilized, can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to men’s entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God. The Church recognizes, too, that men can employ these media contrary to the plan of the Creator and to their own loss” (Vatican II, 1963, art. 2). Since the purpose of all the STCs is to provide ethical guidance in all aspects of human activities, they may also be used to enlighten current topics such as Artificial Intelligence. In his message for the 47th World Communications Day, Pope Benedict XVI encouraged everyone to use ethically scientific inventions. By titling his speech “Social Networks: Portals of Truth and Faith; New Spaces for Evangelization”, the Pope invited pastoral workers to promote the notion of the Common Good through scientific and technological tools (Benedict XVI, 2013, p.1). Nevertheless, he also underscored some potential dangers related to these apparatuses. This alert can also be found in various literary works outside the STCs. Robert Geraci (2010), for instance, in his book published at the Oxford University Press arguments that “Apocalyptic AI advocates promise that in the very near future technological progress will allow us to build supremely intelligent machines and to copy our own minds into machines so that we can live forever in a virtual realm of cyberspace” (p.8). This book further argues that technological progress, especially artificial intelligence, not only facilitates human labor but also dangerously keeps people prisoners of their own inventions. It is no longer very clear, as Geraci puts it, whether humanity’s journey towards the future is controlled by the so-called intelligent machines or by humans themselves. Fortunately, as observed by Schuurman, there are more and more scholars who dedicate huge amounts of their time to studying the issue of artificial intelligence from the viewpoint of ethics and morals. He asserts that “In response to the many ethical issues that arise in AI, several organizations have been established to engage them. The Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University is an example of one secular organization whose mission is to wrestle with some of existential threats of machine intelligence” (Schuurman, 2019, p.7). By underlining the aforementioned institute as one of the secular organizations that deal with ethical issues related to AI, Schuurman postulates the topic of AI as one of the emergencies that not only the STCs but also secular research centers have to seriously deal with.

## 5. Conclusion

The primary reason for which Vatican II was summoned is related to the Roman Catholic Church’s mission in a world characterized by numerous forms of changes and new ideologies. Among the many documents produced by this ecumenical Council, three have been selected to enable this

research to explore the place of artificial intelligence in the Social Teachings of the Church. None of the STCs published by Vatican II uses the term artificial intelligence; a terminology that was coined many years later. Most existing literary works too, as portrayed in the literature review section, do not associate the topic of artificial intelligence with the Social Teachings of the Church. This research fills that gap by arguing that the ethical guidelines contained in Vatican II STCs can still be applied to contemporary existential issues for the welfare of humankind in general. Intersecting the three selected documents with current materials from the Roman Curia such as the aforementioned message of Pope Benedict XVI and various ethical viewpoints from secular scholars, this research finds out that the Church uses AI as one of the tools for evangelization in the modern world.

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