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# The Technocratic Paradigm and its Ethos

## Academic Oration delivered in the Graduation Ceremony (28 November 2016)

I am very pleased and honoured to address you on such a special occasion. When I was invited by the Senate to deliver today's oration, I searched for a common thread among the variety of degrees which will be conferred at this graduation ceremony, ranging from theology to astroinformatics, from bioethics to tourism, from information and communication technology to business ethics, from creativity and innovation to Chinese Medicine.

These areas of specialization reflect the type of culture in which we are living. We cannot imagine living in a world which is not digital, without the advanced biotechnology that is today improving immensely our quality of life, without technological innovation and creativity in business and economics which account for the enormous increase in today's productivity and wealth, without astroinformatics which is extending our knowledge and control of outer space, and without today's information and communication technology which have compressed time and space, turning the world into a global village.

Indeed, technology has become an integral part of our way of life: our *language* (think of the common usage of metaphors derived from communication and computer technology); *norms and values* (think of the way we perceive human life as a commodity, the environment as an economic resource, and human nature no longer as the norm but as raw material for instrumentalisation); and *identity* (think of neurotechnology and the ways how identities are shaped and changed in today's era of digital self-expression and communication).

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I wish to consider briefly the role that theology can play in a technological society and culture. Traditionally, theology has been defined as 'faith seeking understanding' because reason plays an important role in its never ending process of critical self-reflection. Since the starting-point of theology is human experience, theological reflections are constantly challenged by what we meet in real-life situations, thereby undergoing constant revision, enhancement and renewal. The great human problems of the day, such as the misuse of biotechnology, environmental degradation, climate change, human rights violations, immigration, poverty, corruption and good governance, do matter a lot for theology, being a dynamic discipline of systematic reflection on all aspects of human experience in the light of reason and faith.

In a pluralistic and democratic society, one would expect to find an active exchange, discussions and interaction between people. Not only individuals, but also social groups with different cultural and religious backgrounds have the right to voice their opinion on socio-economic, political and environmental issues. Active participation in the debate on matters of public importance is a sign of a healthy democracy. This is true of Churches and other religious organisations. Every religious community should enjoy and put into practice the freedom to articulate its faith perspectives on the concerns of civil society and to recommend solutions for the common good.

Theology has therefore to rediscover itself continuously in order to render its service adequately in a pluralistic society in a spirit of dialogue with others independently of their political, religious and secular beliefs and convictions. Dialogue and collaboration also suppose a readiness to listen and to learn. During the past ten years of experience as a member of the European Group of Ethics in Science and New Technologies (EGE), which is an independent, pluralistic and multidisciplinary advisory body to the European Commission, I have been constantly challenged in the group discussions to search for sound theological insights to articulate people's concerns and fundamental questions about converging technologies, such as nanotechnology, information and communication technologies, and technology in synthetic biology.

Concern about the misuse of technology is not new. In Greek mythology, Prometheus and Pandora epitomise the ambiguity of technological progress and advancement. The potential enormous benefits of science and technology for the improvement of the human condition, symbolised by Prometheus' gift of fire to humanity, is continuously threatened by many hidden risks with far-reaching consequences. For this reason, human *hubris* needs to be restrained by responsibility, foresight and prudence to keep the lid of Pandora's Box tightly closed to avoid adverse consequences for both present and future generations.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI referred in his encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity and Truth, *CV* 68) to the leading danger of the Promethean presumption, namely humanity's belief in self-sufficiency because of the "wonders" of technology. This illusion of omnipotence secludes human reason to the immanence and precludes the horizon of its transcendence.

The link between theology and technology is mediated through rationality which provides appropriate ethical standards. Faith without reason risks being cut off from everyday life. On the other hand, reason which totally shuns a role to faith loses an important dimension of our humanity. The role of theological ethics is to reinterpret and contextualise the rational normative framework within its faith narratives and the tradition of Christian social teaching which enables the Church to take a critical stance towards the tendency of technology to influence our moral consciousness, our conception of the human good and of moral responsibility. Technology becomes an area of moral enquiry for theology because it is no longer merely the extension of human efficacy but is fundamentally transforming human attitudes, perceptions, relationships, behaviour and decisions. The theological horizon offers a broader perspective to technology since it includes the whole fabric of moral and religious existence, the whole of what is entailed by the good and faithful life in relation to others, God and all creation. This built-in holism is one of the great contributions that theological patterns of reflection can offer to thinking critically about the technological *zeitgeist*.

From a theological perspective, "science and technology are wonderful products of a God-given human creativity" (*Laudato Si,* On the Care of Our Common Home, *LS* 102) which empower humanity's vocation to participate in God's creative action (*LS* 131). These significant positive expressions of human freedom, creativity and innovation are considered as outstanding and precious human achievements when placed at the service of the human person and the common good and for integral human development (*LS* 112). Technology can actually improve human life only when accompanied with "a sound ethics, a culture, and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and reaching dear-minded self-restraint" (*LS* 105). Human responsibility, values and conscience arc needed to guide technological power since it is an illusion to claim its moral neutrality (*LS* 114). Guiding principles cannot be inferred from simple technical efficiency, or from the utility accruing to some at the expense of others or, even worse, from prevailing ideologies. Technology must be judged not by its ability to do something faster, cheaper or easier, but rather by the quality of its impact on people, both individually and collectively, and on the environment.

The "technocratic paradigm" is questionable because it "exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external world. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation" (*LS* 106). This Promethean vision of mastery over the world (*LS* 115) reflects the excessive individualism, the domination of instrumental reason and the structures of industrial technological society, which the philosopher of culture Charles Taylor, identifies as the three malaises of modernity.

Technology affects and conditions the way we think and relate with others and nature. It "creates a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups. Decisions which may seem purely instrumental are i n reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build" (*LS* 107). It has become the principal key that we use today to interpret the meaningfulness of human existence (*LS* 110). In the context of today's 'throwaway culture, - a phrase frequently used by Pope Francis - those who do not satisfy the perceived requirements of utility and efficiency, such as the sick and the dying, risk losing the respect that they should have (*LS* 123).

Moreover, technology has the risk of rendering us self-centred and oblivious of the larger picture of reality. The fragmentation of knowledge proves helpful for concrete application, yet it often leads to a loss of appreciation for the whole, for the relationship between things, and for the broader horizon, which then becomes irrelevant. This makes it hard to find adequate ways of solving the more complex problems of today's world, particularly those regarding the environment and the poor (*LS* 110). Furthermore, those enslaved by the 'technocratic paradigm' find it very difficult to imagine ways of dealing with the dilemma of human existence which do not involve exploitative technology, but even worse, too many think that it is by technology alone that such difficulties can be dealt with (*LS* 110).

The 'technocratic paradigm' also tends to dominate economic and political life. The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit-making, without concern for its potential short- and long-term negative impact on human beings and the environment (*LS* 109). The continuous change of economic, social and financial structures resulting from technological progress has a major impact on civil society's values and attitudes towards the environment, the megaprojects of land speculators and developers, cronies and political corruption, the job market, the just distribution of social benefits, the issue of poverty line in society, the credibility of institutions set up to protect the

environment, and good governance. Theology cannot remain indifferent when faced with civil society's concern and questions on such important matters. Pope Francis in his encyclical letter *Evangelii Gaudium* (*EG,* The Joy of the Gospel) remarks that theology must not remain "abstract or mere generalities which challenge no one but must be concrete by drawing practical conclusions. The Church's pastors have the right to offer opinions on all that affects people's lives, since the task of evangelization implies and demands the integral promotion of each human being. It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven. God wants his children to live happy and with dignity in this world too. Consequently, no one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society" (*EG* 182-3).

The challenges of the 'technocratic paradigm' and the *ethos* it spawns are alive and strong among us. The commodification of the environment was at the core of the decision to ravage the natural environment at Zonqor Point and Hondoq ir-Rummiem, a decision strongly resisted by civil society. Environmental NGOs are also taking a strong stand against the new trend of constructing high-rise buildings. Theology, which starts its reflections from human experience, is bound to address civil society's questions and doubts on the impact of these projects on the quality of life of the Maltese citizens.

Inspired by the tradition of theological reflections on sustainable development and technology, particularly as articulated by Pope Francis in his environmental encyclical, the local Church, through its hierarchy and its Environment Commission, has exercised its legitimate right to pronounce its ethical perspectives on these controversial projects. The local Church's prophetic role on environmental issues is in tune with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's remarks in *Caritas in Veritate:* "Development is impossible without upright men and women, without financiers and politicians whose consciences are firmly attuned to the requirements of the common good" (*CV* 71).

Moreover, in this year's message on 1st September to mark the Church's World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, Pope Francis states that "Economics and politics, society and culture cannot be dominated by thinking only of the short-term and immediate financial or electoral gains. Instead, they urgently need to be redirected to the common good, which includes sustainability and care for creation." These are just few examples that illustrate the role of religious convictions in the public square.

In conclusion, I would like to congratulate you, dear graduands, on your success in your post-graduate studies. We are here to celebrate your accomplishments. Congratulations for arriving at this important milestone and to your parents and loved ones who have supported you throughout your academic journey. Now that you have concluded a chapter in your lifetime, be courageous to commence a new one with enthusiasm and courage. Be innovative and creative to fulfil your ambitions. Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Keep in mind that it is harder to engage in your respective careers with honesty, integrity, transparency and responsibility than to get an academic degree! Be ambassadors of our *Alma Mater* by showing that our university has empowered you not only with knowledge, skills and an academic degree, but also with human values, wisdom of heart, and moral qualities to make a difference in your own life and that of others.

Good luck and congratulations. Thank you.

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