

## CHAPTER XII

### Towards a Just Digital Society: Shared Responsibility According to the Catholic Church

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#### Abstract

The digital revolution has raised various ethical challenges, such as data privacy, social media misuse, and algorithmic bias. Amidst this tide, the Catholic Church seeks to provide enlightenment through its social teachings on human dignity and justice. The Church views internet access as a fundamental human right and condemns all forms of digital discrimination. Catholic teaching emphasizes shared responsibility, not technological determinism. Therefore, multidisciplinary collaboration is needed to ensure digital technologies benefit all, without exception. The Church is directly involved through the advocacy of the Holy Father and grassroots initiatives such as digital literacy for the poor. Looking ahead, global cooperation and cross-faith solidarity are crucial to ensuring digital technologies contribute to the well-being of all humankind.

**Keywords:** Catholic Church, digital ethics, social justice, technology, religion, shared responsibility.

#### Introduction

The digital revolution has transformed how we communicate, work, learn, and interact. The rapid advancement of digital technologies such as the internet, artificial intelligence, automation, and social media platforms has created new opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, digital technologies have increased access to information, expanded the reach of education, and facilitated greater political participation. However, these advancements have also raised concerns about data privacy, the digital divide, and the spread of misinformation and hate speech (Pope Francis, 2019).

Amidst this wave of digitalization, the Catholic Church calls upon all parties, especially Christian devotees, to play a role in building a more just and inclusive digital society. The Vatican firmly declares that internet access is a

fundamental human right through its various official documents. Therefore, no one, especially the poor and marginalized, should be excluded from the benefits of these advanced technologies (Vatican Council for Justice and Peace, 2020).

The Church views the digital revolution as inseparable from contemporary human reality. As such, the Church seeks to understand the ethical dimensions of digital technology developments to enlighten the devotees and the general public. One of the main areas of the Church's concern is education, particularly intra-personal education and digital ethics. According to Pope Francis (2019), education must help the younger generation wisely and responsibly understand and utilize digital technologies, not for manipulation and domination.

From a theological perspective, advancements in digital technology must not be seen as technological determinism that operates beyond human control. Instead, technology is created by and meant to serve humanity. Therefore, humanity must control and direct technology for the common good (Ratzinger, 2021). This responsibility requires ethical awareness and shared commitment from church institutions, technology developers, and all members of society.

This paper aims to analyze the Catholic Church's view on how to build a more just digital future. Specifically, this paper will discuss three main issues: 1) The ethical challenges of digital disruption. Some key issues to be addressed include privacy and personal data use, the spread of misinformation (hoaxes), hate speech and cyberbullying on social media, and algorithmic biases that may exacerbate stereotypes and prejudice (Cahill, 2022). 2) The role of the Church in building a more humane and inclusive digital society.

The discussion will focus on the contribution of the Church's social teachings on digitalization issues, such as the Church's moral message regarding human dignity, solidarity, and social justice. Various concrete initiatives by the Church to promote ethical and responsible digitalization are also analyzed (Francis, 2020). 3) The broader implications of the need for a socially just digital revolution. This section discusses global challenges around the digital divide between developed and developing countries. It also explores opportunities for cross-religious and multidisciplinary cooperation, both locally and globally, to ensure that the benefits of digital technology can be felt equitably by all groups in society without exception (Benedict XVI, 2009).

Overall, this paper seeks to explore the Catholic Church's view on creating a more just digital society through the collaboration of all elements of society. Thus, humanity can continue to utilize advancements in digital technology for the well-

being of all humankind, not the other way around. The questions to be answered are: 1) How does the Catholic Church view the ethical challenges posed by developments in digital technology? What are the main ethical issues that arise? 2) How do the Catholic Church's social teachings contribute to building a more just and inclusive digital society? 3) How does the Catholic Church think digital technology can be utilized to achieve the well-being of all humanity, not the opposite? 4) What are the global challenges and opportunities for cross-sector cooperation to ensure a socially just digital revolution?

This study will provide essential insights into the Catholic Church's ethical views on digitalization by answering the questions above. The study results are also expected to inspire and guide concrete efforts at the local and global levels to create a more just digital society for all parties.

## **Literature Review**

### **Ethical Challenges in the Digital Age**

The rapid development of digital technology has brought many benefits to human life, but at the same time, it has also raised various new ethical challenges and dilemmas. According to Ratzinger (2006), technology provides hope and threats; it opens up new possibilities for humanity while also threatening human dignity. Therefore, profound reflection on the ethical dimensions of modern technology is needed.

One of the main challenges relates to privacy and the use of personal data. The development of digital technology has enabled the large-scale collection and use of personal data, often without the knowledge, let alone consent, of the data owner. These risks violate privacy and human dignity (Francis, 2020). Data manipulation is also prone to abuse to marginalize vulnerable groups such as people with low incomes, minorities, and people with disabilities. According to Schwarz (2021), high ethical standards are needed to use data not to degrade the dignity of the people it represents.

Another issue is the spread of misinformation (hoaxes), hate speech, and cyberbullying on social media. Internet anonymity has triggered deviant behaviors that degrade human dignity (Francis, 2019). Strom (2021) warns of the long-term psychological effects of cyberbullying, especially on teenagers. Data protection and content regulation are needed, but so is increased ethical awareness of the technology users. Another ethical issue relates to biases and injustices reinforced

by algorithms. Algorithms are often designed based on unrepresentative data, thus potentially reinforcing stereotypes and stigmas (Cahill, 2021). For example, automated decision-making systems can unfairly filter out job candidates or credit based on factors of race, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. Algorithm auditing and fair, inclusive system design are required.

On the other hand, technological advancements also present challenges related to access gaps or the so-called digital divide. Most of the benefits of digital technology are enjoyed by residents of advanced cities, while most of the population in developing countries still do not have reliable, affordable internet access. According to Schwarzbach (2020), this can widen the gap between the rich and digitally literate, further exacerbating global economic and social inequality.

According to Francis (2020), the challenges above necessitate the active involvement of all elements of society to ensure digital technology benefits all, not just a lucky few. As a moral institution, the Church must provide enlightenment and advocate for technology's ethical and socially responsible use. Only then can humanity continue to utilize advances in digital fields for the well-being of all humanity.

### **The Catholic Church's View on Technology and the Digital Society**

The Catholic Church views technological developments and the digital society as inevitable realities that require wise responses. According to Pope Francis (2020), digital and artificial intelligence advancements are inseparable parts of today's reality. The Church seeks to understand the ethical dimensions of these phenomena to enlighten the devotees and the world.

Theologically, the Church views technology as the work and creativity of humans created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:28). As such, technology is essentially neutral and can be misused, but can also be used for noble purposes such as enhancing human dignity (John Paul II, 1987). However, technological advancements must not be seen as determinism that operates beyond human control. Instead, technology must be developed and directed to serve human interests (Ratzinger, 2006).

Therefore, according to the Church, the most significant responsibility regarding the impact of technology lies on the shoulders of humans themselves (Schwarz, 2020). Technology must be accompanied by ethical awareness and commitment to ensure it benefits all, not widening the gap between the rich-poor and strong-weak. Profound reflection, interfaith, and multidisciplinary dialogue are

needed so that technology truly serves all humanity, not just the interests of a handful of powerful groups.

In the context of the digital society, the Church unequivocally declares that internet access is a fundamental human right (Vatican Council for Justice and Peace, 2020). Therefore, there must be no gender, ethnic, socioeconomic status, or geographic location-based discrimination that prevents someone from enjoying the benefits of advanced technology. The internet access gap between urban and rural residents and between rich and poor countries must be addressed immediately.

On the other hand, freedom in the digital world must also be accompanied by personal and collective responsibility to avoid misuse, for example, by conducting digital education and anti-hoax and hate speech campaigns online. According to Roser (2021), ethical digital standards are needed so that freedom of expression in cyberspace is not arbitrarily interpreted or leads to anarchism.

Regarding the future, the Church warns that advancements in digital fields, including artificial intelligence (AI), must not erode moral and humanitarian values (Pope Francis, 2020). AI and intelligent machines must be developed focusing on justice, accountability, and transparency. Regulatory frameworks and digital ethics task forces are needed at various levels to ensure advanced technology continues to serve all humanity rather than creating new idols that could potentially be harmful.

### **Principles of Digital Ethics According to the Church's Social Teachings**

The Catholic Church's social teachings contain several ethical and moral principles relevant to developing digital technology more humanely and justly. These principles are outlined, among others, in official Vatican documents such as encyclicals, apostolic letters, and statements from the Pope and bishops. One of the most fundamental principles concerns human dignity stemming from being created in the image and likeness of God (Francis, 2020). This means everyone has equal worth and dignity regardless of background and condition. This principle prohibits discrimination and demands full solidarity with others, including developing and applying digital technology.

The following principle relates to justice and activism against socioeconomic inequality. According to Pope Benedict XVI (2009), access to the fruits of scientific and technological progress, including the internet, is a fundamental part of social justice in the era of globalization. States and moral institutions must combat all forms of injustice that create digital divides and limit one's ability to participate in society.

In addition, the Church's social teachings also promote the principle of subsidiarity, namely that higher authorities (such as the state) must give freedom and help lower authorities do what they can do themselves (Cahill, 2018). In digitalization, for example, technology developers may only take over human roles and functions if they do not violate moral boundaries. Regarding artificial intelligence (AI), the Church warns that AI must not develop beyond human control or place itself above humans (DiNardo, 2021). Instead, AI must be designed to remain subject to universal human values such as solidarity, empathy, and social justice. Active involvement of ethics and theology experts is needed in developing AI systems to align with Catholic morality.

The basic principles of the Church's social teachings are helpful as a moral compass in building a more humane and egalitarian digital society (Schwarz, 2020). The Church's social teachings remind us that all social structures, including digital technology, must submit to serving human dignity and the common good, not the other way around. Only then can humans continue to utilize advances in the digital field for the well-being of all humanity.

## **Discussion**

### **Privacy and Personal Data Usage**

The development of digital technology has enabled the large-scale collection and use of personal data, often without the knowledge, let alone consent, of the data owner. This raises concerns about privacy violations and data misuse for covert purposes. According to Schwartz (2020), there is no adequate legal and ethical framework currently to protect digital privacy and human dignity from irresponsible data manipulation. The Catholic Church unequivocally states that privacy is a fundamental human right that must be protected, including in the digital world (Vatican Council for Justice and Peace, 2014). The collection and use of personal data must uphold the individual's dignity and obtain consent from the person concerned. Unfortunately, these ethical standards have not yet been fully adhered to in business and government practices in the digital era.

For example, technology giants like Google, Facebook and Amazon collect massive amounts of user data, which is then analyzed for personalized profiling and ad targeting. Often, the algorithms used are highly complex and lack transparency, posing privacy risks without the user's awareness (Cahill, 2021). On the other hand, governments also often exploit legal loopholes to conduct mass surveillance of citizens under the guise of national security or terrorism prevention.

For instance, by monitoring digital data traffic, personal emails, online activity trails, and so on (Schwarz, 2020). This violates privacy and digital freedoms, which are fundamental human rights.

According to Francis (2020), the challenge of the times is maintaining collective security without sacrificing individual privacy through excessive mass surveillance or digital profiling. Clear ethical standards and laws are needed so that personal data is not misused to marginalize certain parties or manipulate a person's behavior solely for business profits. Full transparency and owner consent are also required if data is used for research or other purposes. According to Francis (2019), apart from external regulations, it is also essential to instill ethical awareness among technology developers and users. For example, they are incorporating digital ethics materials into curricula, including religious education in schools and faith communities. Thus, all parties are expected to be responsible for maintaining privacy in an increasingly transparent digital world.

### **Hoaxes and Hate Speech on social media**

Social media has become a central arena of socialization in the digital world. Unfortunately, internet anonymity is often exploited by irresponsible parties to spread false information (hoaxes), hate speech, and other harmful content that degrades human dignity. According to Strom (2020), this phenomenon has spread rapidly due to the lack of digital literacy and the ethics of social media usage in society.

The Catholic Church is very concerned about the proliferation of harmful and destructive content on social media. This contradicts the spirit of solidarity and universal brotherhood taught by religion. According to Daniel DiNardo (2019), the spread of hoaxes and hate speech on social media is tantamount to evil activism that must be firmly rejected by all elements of society. In particular, young people and educators are urged to be vigilant and wise in filtering information on social media (Pope Francis, 2019). Digital content consumption patterns must be balanced with positive activities such as reading books, sports activities, and environmental awareness to avoid the adverse psychological effects of excessive exposure to hoaxes and hate speech.

On the other hand, governments and social media platform providers must also take responsibility by making policies and algorithms to limit the circulation of dangerous content. Existing laws and regulations also need to be enforced

consistently to eradicate illegal activities such as intimidation, pornography and incitement to violence through online platforms.

According to Famerée (2021), in addition to these external efforts, moral awareness and digital maturity also need to be built among the social media users themselves. This can be done by incorporating digital ethics and literacy education into formal curricula, pastoral mentoring activities, and psychological counseling for devotees and youth who are already addicted to negative interactions on social media. With this multidisciplinary approach, it is hoped that social media, which initially had the potential to divide, will become a mouthpiece for genuine solidarity and brotherhood. As a digital public space, social media must promote universal human values and not become a breeding ground for hatred and hostility between fellow human beings.

### **Digital Access Gap**

Although digital technology has advanced rapidly, its access and benefits have not been evenly distributed across all levels of world society. A relatively wide digital gap exists between citizens in advanced cities and those living in rural and remote areas. Likewise, between residents of rich and developing countries. According to Francis (2020), this is unacceptable because internet access should be a fundamental human right for everyone in the digital age. This technology access gap has the potential to widen economic and educational disparities. Those without internet access are limited in their ability to improve their skills and access information to gain decent employment and improve their welfare. Meanwhile, advanced countries continue to drive the development of digital economies and knowledge-based societies without looking back.

The Catholic Church unequivocally states that every person has the right to enjoy the fruits of scientific and technological progress for their families, especially the poor (Benedict XVI, 2009). Therefore, the duty of states and international institutions is to ensure reliable telecommunications infrastructure and internet networks extend to remote areas, affordable to all citizens without exception. At the grassroots level, faith communities are also encouraged to participate in building an inclusive digital society. For example, by providing villagers with digital literacy and basic internet skills training, online access facilities at local community centers, or even designing custom mobile applications that benefit the poor and disabled to access online public services (Richter, 2020).



Thus, technological advances are genuinely felt by all elements of society. According to the Church, unequal access to the fruits of human civilization is an embarrassing ethical scandal for humankind in this era of globalization (Pope Francis, 2020). All components of the nation bear responsibility for realizing an inclusive and egalitarian digital society so that technology always serves all humanity.

### **Algorithmic Bias and Stereotyping**

The development of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning algorithms has facilitated the automation of various decision-making processes. However, behind this efficiency are ethical dilemmas regarding biases and injustices that are sometimes unknowingly reinforced by these intelligent systems.

According to Cahill (2021), algorithms often use historically unrepresentative data or contain certain negative biases. As a result, discriminatory patterns and stereotypes against specific gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status groups continue to be reproduced or even exacerbated by the machine. For example, an MIT Media Lab study (2018) found that facial recognition algorithms had far higher detection accuracy on white faces than on black faces. Alternatively, an employee recruitment algorithm tends to select male applicants rather than females because male employee profiles dominate its training data.

Practices like this violate the principles of justice and human dignity the Catholic Church upholds. Any form of discrimination, negative views or labels that degrade others is a sin of breach of love (Pope Francis, 2020). Stereotypes of vulnerable groups such as the disabled, poor families or religious minorities often trigger prejudices that lead to concrete acts of hatred. Therefore, AI and algorithm technology developers must conduct regular audits to ensure systems are free from bias toward gender, race, sexual orientation, cultural background, and socioeconomic status (Schwarz, 2021). Social science and humanities experts, not just data science experts, must be involved in integrating human value perspectives at every design stage to operationalize these intelligent technologies in the broader community.

From a regulatory perspective, existing regulations must also be adapted to the latest technological developments. For example, it could require regular algorithm auditing or establishing a specialized national oversight authority to monitor and follow up on the operationalization of AI and algorithms that have the

potential to discriminate against vulnerable communities (DiNardo, 2021). Only with such a multidisciplinary approach can the ethical challenges of advanced technology be anticipated as early as possible for justice and equality for all groups.

### **Church Initiatives for Inclusive Digitalization**

The Catholic Church provides ethical-theological enlightenment regarding digitalization issues and is directly involved in various concrete initiatives to encourage socially inclusive digitalization amidst society. Whether through the formal Church structure or the diverse grassroots communities spread worldwide. At the Vatican itself, Pope Francis regularly voices moral messages regarding digital technology's positive and negative impacts, whether through sermons, official statements, or appeals on social media. In addition, the Vatican Council for Justice and Peace is also active in producing ethical guidelines regarding the use of AI, automation, digital platforms and other relevant topics. These documents serve as references for pastors and lay people worldwide.

Cardinals and local bishops in various countries are also actively initiating Church involvement in local digitalization issues. For example, the Archbishop of Jakarta, Ignatius Suharyo, once facilitated the establishment of a digital laboratory to empower social technology startups to eradicate poverty in Indonesia (KWI, 2019). Bishop Helder Camara is known in Brazil for his campaigns against the digital divide among rural poor farmers (Boff & Boff, 2004).

Meanwhile, at the grassroots level, many Catholic community organizations or NGOs dedicate themselves to inclusive digitalization efforts, such as *Comunio ラでコミュニケーションとインフルエンサー* (Communication and Influencers on Social Media) in Japan, which regularly holds influencer schools for the younger generation to wisely utilize digital platforms for the common good (UCANews, 2021).

The Catholic Network for Digital Inclusion in the United States champions affordable high-speed internet access throughout the country, including native reservations, with cross-subsidy funding support from commercial internet service providers in the cities (Ford, 2020). Grassroots practices like these are essential to ensure the entire community can feel the benefits of digital technology. Considering the massive digitalization trend, the Church's advocacy and mentoring role will be increasingly needed. At the same time, socio-economic gaps and the digital divide between community groups have not yet been completely closed.

Thus, humans can continue to harness advances in digital technology for the well-being of all, without exception.

## **Conclusion**

The digital revolution has brought about fundamental changes in contemporary human life. On the one hand, advancements in digital technologies such as the internet, social media platforms, and artificial intelligence have opened up new opportunities for increased access to education, information, employment, and broader political participation. However, this digital disruption has also raised several new ethical challenges and dilemmas threatening the human dimension.

The Catholic Church, through official Vatican documents such as encyclicals and statements from the Holy Father, has firmly stated that access to digital technology and the internet is a fundamental human right in this contemporary era. Therefore, there should be no discrimination that prevents someone from enjoying the benefits of digital technology because of gender, socioeconomic status, geographic location or other factors. However, there is currently a vast digital divide between residents of advanced cities and those living in rural and remote areas in various developed and developing countries. According to the Church, this gap must be immediately addressed as it can widen inequality gaps in access to education, employment opportunities, decent incomes, and the ability to participate in digital society.

In addition to the access gap issue, the Church is also very concerned about the proliferation of harmful and destructive content on social media, such as hate speech, hoaxes, radicalism propaganda, and cyber-bullying, which increasingly damage moral values and human dignity. This must be rejected collectively through the state's role in more vigorous law enforcement, social media platforms restricting the circulation of dangerous content, and increasing the users' digital literacy and ethical awareness.

The Church also warns against algorithmic biases or discrimination regarding artificial intelligence systems. AI design must integrate universal human values such as justice and appreciation of differences. Algorithm auditing and an adequate regulatory framework are also needed to keep AI serving humanity, not threatening human dignity.

Overall, the formation and use of digital technology, according to the Church, must be based on ethical awareness and moral principles, both individual and collective. Humans create technology and must continue to serve humanity,

not otherwise widening digital divides or unequal access to the fruits of contemporary human civilization progress. Cross-religious, multidisciplinary, cross-sector cooperation and global community collaboration are necessary to resolve the ethical challenges of digitalization for the benefit of all humanity.

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