



Catholic Commentaries

by

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CULTIVATING “REAL” INTELLIGENCE

(January 18, 2024)

Each year on the feast of St. Francis de Sales (January 24), the patron saint of Catholic journalists, the pope publishes a message for the celebration of World Communications Day (celebrated on the Sunday before Pentecost). [The theme for the 2024 message](#) concerns the revolution of “artificial intelligence” and the challenges that this poses to truly human communications.

We know that Francis de Sales was quite intelligent and a successful communicator! After all, he is recognized as a “doctor” of the Church, whose writings remain insightful for knowing the way to salvation. So, too, he is considered a “master” of sacred eloquence, whose spoken knowledge from the pulpit provides light for the intellect and warmth for the will.



Not surprisingly, then, our patron saint champions the work of the mind. From a young age, he pondered the power of reason – really, its “beauty” – as that which distinguishes human beings from all other animals (when we use it!). Standing in a long line of Christian humanists, Francis holds to the view that reason gives us the ability to govern our lives, even when our thoughts or passions seem to be battling within us.

That’s why he so values learning, recommending that we “study more and more, with diligence and humility” (*Letters*, XXI:11). It’s why he could often be found personally teaching the catechism to the people in his diocese (initiating what we now know as C.C.D.). The saintly bishop also instructed his clergy routinely on topics in theology, even going so far as to claim that “knowledge, to a priest, is the eighth sacrament of the hierarchy of the Church” (*Oeuvres*, XXIII:303) – because erroneous teaching has the power to lead souls astray!

But in Salesian spirituality, there’s more to intelligence than just smarts. For Francis, knowledge finds its ultimate purpose in love. The operations of the intellect that he describes – thought, study, meditation, and contemplation – are intended to lead and unite us to Wisdom itself by way of an appreciation of the truth, beauty, and goodness of God.

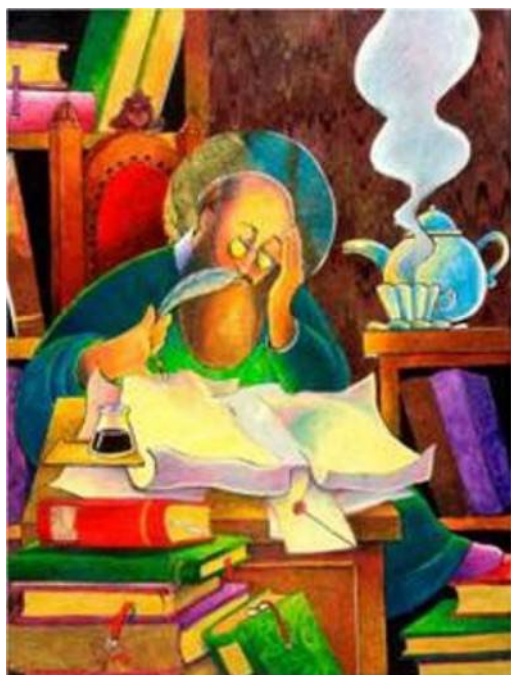
Yes, our patron saint was eminently intelligent. But the wisdom he shares through his writing and speaking is always inclined to what is practical and live-able. Though mystical in his magnificence, it comes down to us as “inspired common sense” (Elisabeth Stopp).

That’s the kind of intelligence that can benefit us. Faced with today’s challenge of information overload, we find ourselves having to navigate the turbulent waves of digital news (real or fake), political arguments (conservative or liberal), and public opinions (logical or not). Perhaps now more than ever, “we need to have a well-balanced and reasonable mind” (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, III:36).

Reading (again) [the works of St. Francis de Sales](#) is a great place to do that. Surely his saintly wisdom will help us to cultivate our own minds, so that we might learn to live in love. That, ultimately, is the mark of an intelligence that is “real” not artificial.

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featured image - <https://donbosco.press/en/our-saints/st-francis-de-sales-life-1-8/>



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(January 31, 2024)

Can artificial intelligence (AI) really fix everything?



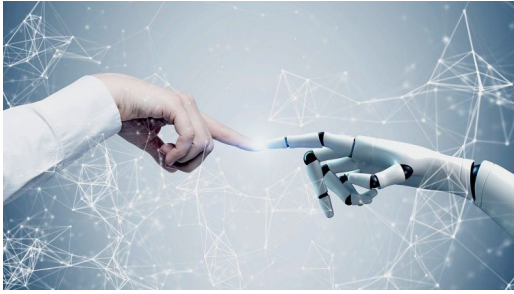
The question arose, with a “wink-and-nod,” in the “coy disclaimer” to a recent social media post that showed computer-generated photos picturing Donald Trump and Joe Biden as buddies, sharing each other’s company as if they were lifelong friends. [Karen Swallow Prior](#) calls the viral image “a fun way to offer the reminder that ‘seeing’ is not necessarily believing these days.”

Generative AI represents a qualitatively new phase in the ongoing revolution of communications technology. Its seemingly endless potential has already found helpful application in education, business, medicine, and other sectors. From automated messaging to strategic planning to research and writing, the computing capabilities of AI make for a much more expeditious, and perhaps effective, use of our time.

But it does not, on that account, “fix” things. Repetitious contacts or painstaking research or thoughtful prioritizing are not “broken” tasks. They may be time-consuming and energy-spending, but that does not mean they need to be repaired.

What does need fixing is our understanding of what communication actually means and what it fully entails. The emergence of artificial intelligence challenges our appreciation of the essential features of this distinctively human activity.

Pope Francis takes up the “exciting and disorienting” theme of AI in his [Message for the 2024 World Day of Communications](#), which was issued on January 24, the feast of St. Francis de Sales (patron saint of journalists and Catholic writers). Following upon his reflection on this same topic in his [message for the World Day of Peace](#), the Holy Father now addresses the need to respond to a fundamental question that AI puts before us all: “How can we remain fully human and guide this cultural transformation to serve a good purpose?”



On the one hand, the power of AI focuses our attention more on technology than on people, more on how we communicate than on who communications are from and for. “No doubt, machines possess a limitlessly greater capacity than human beings for storing and correlating data,” the pope writes, “but human beings alone are capable of making sense of that data.”

On the other hand, any communication that fails to account for truth runs the risk of distorting reality. Deepfake photos and manipulated stories may lead to laughter (when we spot them), but they can also hinder the intelligent interaction needed for real social discourse. Noting that he, too, has been the object of such stories, the pope rightly cautions us to be wary of the “cognitive pollution” that arises from the “technology of simulation.”

With a nod to the reflections of Romano Guardini, and reminiscent of his reference to St. Francis de Sales in last year’s message, Pope Francis again calls for us to cultivate the “real” intelligence that comes from the wisdom of the heart. Only there do we find “the virtue that enables us to integrate the whole and its parts, our decisions and their consequences, our nobility and our vulnerability, our past and our future, our individuality and our membership within a larger community.”

That integrating power of human intelligence recognizes that “information cannot be separated from living relationships” – with each other and with Wisdom itself. Now thrust into this new phase in the history of communications – “which risks become rich in technology and poor in humanity” – we need this wisdom of the heart to deal with what the pope describes as the primordial human temptation, namely “to become *like God without God*.”

That temptation has resurfaced with the astonishing and widespread applications of so-called artificial intelligence, “whose workings and potential are beyond the ability of most of us to understand and appreciate.” With this technology, we are faced with a new variation on an age-old choice. “It is up to us,” the pope concludes, “to decide whether we will become fodder for algorithms or will nourish our hearts with that freedom without which we cannot grow in wisdom.”

Making that decision, as St. Francis de Sales wrote long ago in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, requires that we have a “well-balanced and reasonable mind.” Using just minds to make good choices is not something machines can manage, no matter how many words or images they can generate.

As fascinating as AI may be, the only fix to everything comes when the “communications” we engage in do what that terms says – by creating a “union with” each other through a shared appreciation of what is really true and beautiful and good.

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AWAKING AGAIN TO CONFESSION

(February 15, 2024)

Thanks to being “woke,” our culture seems to have taken the offensive against being offended! In the name of justice, movements seek to “cancel” a host of historical wrongs.

The Church, too, supports a cancelling movement, but with a different procedure in mind. It’s called Confession (a.k.a., Penance, Reconciliation). Centuries ago, St. Francis de Sales penned a commentary (“Advice to Confessors”) that awakens us to the power of this sacramental practice.



Valentin Metzinger, 1753, Sv. Frančišek Saleški spoveduje plemiča (St. Francis de Sales confesses a nobleman)

Confession does seek to eradicate remnants of social wrongs. Admitting to sins – “in what I have done and what I have failed to do” – shines an uncomfortable light on anyone’s past.

But as a sacrament, and not merely an exercise of cultural recrimination, Confession is not about the past. It focuses on the present experience of divine grace that renders the penitent worthier than before. As Francis reminds us, “confession and penance render a man infinitely more honorable than sin renders him blamable.”

Sadly, many people have experienced more blame than honor. Far too many are the stories of priests chiding penitents harshly for the faults that have burdened them, or of questioning them so extensively as to make confession more like an inquisition.

Cancel culture may come with outrage, but Confession never should.

That's why the saintly Bishop advises the priests of his diocese to "Remember that at the beginning of their confessions the poor penitents call you 'Father,' and that you must indeed have a fatherly heart toward them." He also reminds all of us that confessors, "being sinners themselves are obliged to be humble, meek, and to lower themselves with the penitents by a gentle condescension."

Still, confessing one's sins can be an uncomfortable, even shameful, experience. Wokeness excites that emotion to rage against wrong. But for people going to Confession, that feeling usually make them apprehensive.

The gentleman saint counters any hesitancy with the assurance that "the greater our misery, the more is the mercy of God glorified." Consider, he says, the great saints who were also great sinners (e.g., St. Peter or St. Mary Magdalene). Recall, too, the words of Jesus who "prayed to his Father for those who crucified him, to let us know that even if we were to crucify him with our own hands, he would willingly pardon us."

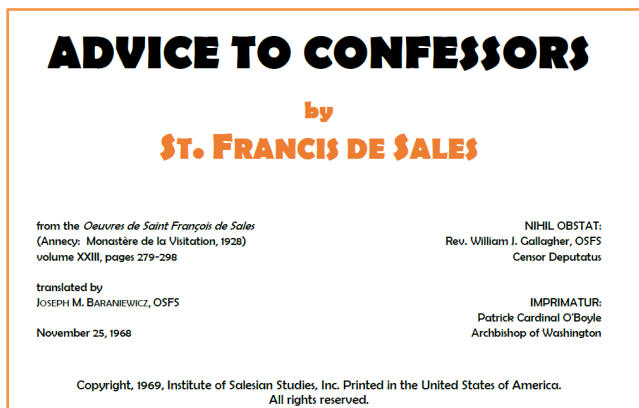
That Christocentric faith leads Francis to conclude that "we can do no greater wrong to the goodness of God and to the Passion and Death of our Lord than to have a lack of confidence of obtaining pardon for our iniquities."

During Lent we journey toward that Paschal Mystery by which our Lord has redeemed the whole world, bringing sinners – including us – to salvation. We best prepare for this by confidently entrusting ourselves to the mercy of God, communicated to us uniquely and experientially in this sacrament.

To ask forgiveness in Confession is to join and benefit from a sacred movement, one that through grace will bring not the cancellation of history but a reconciliation with it.

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links to more ...



FAR MORE THAN A YEARLY RITUAL

(March 28, 2024)

The Last Supper is the most revolutionary meal in human history!

In the Gospel story for Holy Thursday (John 13:1-15), the term “revolution” does not appear. But that’s exactly what Jesus brings about. In dramatic fashion, He turns upside down the way we are to relate to one another ... and thereby defines the existential key to being Christian.



image from Dunleer Parish on Facebook

Jesus’s washing the feet of His disciples does not merely express or simply model service. It’s far more radical! First, He exemplifies it to and for his disciples. Then He commands it, as the profound conversion needed by those who would follow Him.

He, who is Teacher and Master, models a new mode of relating to others that demands a complete overhaul of our natural human inclination to put ourselves first. Instead, and deliberately, we are to place ourselves at the feet of others – in the self-abasement expected of a household servant (as Jesus vividly demonstrates).



Oblate Father Roger Balducelli teaches the lesson of Holy Thursday as ...
We ought “to consider and treat others as more important to me than I am to myself.”

Jesus did this by His Incarnation. He lowered himself from heavenly heights to come into earthly existence. Taking on our fallible, mortal condition – in all things but sin – He is able “to fully reveal man to man himself and make his supreme calling clear” (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22).

Jesus does this on the Cross. There he suffers the worst of degradations – an innocent one experiencing the anguish of crucifixion. And He does so voluntarily, embracing excruciating pain for the sake of others – for sinners, like you and me.

Considering and treating others as more important to me than I am to myself – that’s how Jesus relates to us. The Son of God treats humanity as more important to God than God is to God’s self!

That’s the truth and depth of divine love present in Jesus. And that way of being-in-relation, that way of love, becomes fundamental to a truly Christian life when the Master says: “as I have done for you, you should also do.” It’s quite a challenge, but with grace all things are possible.

In fact, the grace of this revolutionary Christian love has been perpetuated throughout history. It still works in our time – in the lives of saints and in the Church’s memorial celebration of the Mass.

In the Church at worship, through the mediation of Word and Sacrament Jesus comes to be present. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the absent Jesus is present again in our midst, still among us. What a mystery!

But there’s more to the Eucharistic phenomenon. In the Blessed Sacrament, Jesus is not just present *there*. He is present *there for us*, in relation *to us*. His presence makes real our encounter with God – in the dynamism of being broken, shared, and consumed.

On Holy Thursday, Jesus dramatically demonstrated the self-giving evident in God’s relation to His people. Nowadays, in the gift of the Eucharist, that sacrifice becomes *present in the present*, as Jesus continues to give Himself to us each and every time we “do this in memory of (Him).”

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Linguists enjoy oxymorons – those word pairings that, despite being a contradiction literally, nevertheless still make sense. A civil war is anything but, nor is a legal brief. By definition, order is not random and shrimp cannot be jumbo.

Should we consider “artificial intelligence” in the same way? That depends on what intelligence is and, more importantly, what it is for.

IQ tests presume that this distinctly human capability (intelligence) has a measurable magnitude (quotient). But intelligence shows itself in differing ways.

Philosophical reasoning wrestles with abstract thought. Scientific modeling offers tested hypotheses. Artistic expression reveals unique perspectives. Technical expertise manages how things work.

Each form of intelligence demands a particular knowledge. Each draws upon prior sources and experiences. Each offers understanding that contributes to the collective quotient of human development.

The advent of “artificial intelligence” comes with an offer of all that and more.

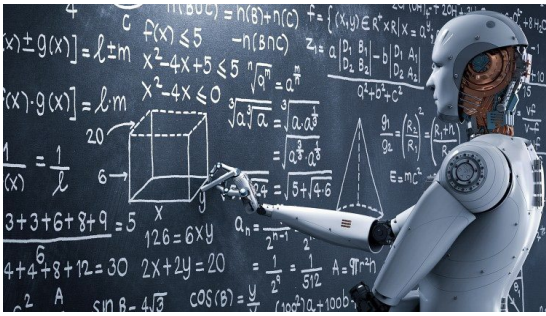
Championed as a way to harness technology to simulate human intelligence and problem-solving capabilities, [artificial intelligence](#) impacts how we know and what we do. Sensors analyze your car’s performance, while GPS guides where travelers go.

AI can also speed up, even generate, information and communication, as it “learns” from all the data at its disposal. It can search entire libraries for us and produce writings from us.

AI is exciting. Its potential for undertaking a wide range of tasks, whether mundane or intricate, will increase human productivity.

AI is also disorienting. Its power to distort the truth, through fake news or doctored images, will decrease human interactivity.





The prospect of substituting AI for human intelligence and social communication raises significant questions for the Church in service to humanity. [Fr. Justin](#), an AI chatbot, cannot answer them! But Pope Francis does reflect on them in his recent [Message for World Communications Day](#), which was celebrated last Sunday.

(image: Vatican News)

The pope affirms AI's "great possibilities for good." But he wisely adds that these "are accompanied by the risk of turning everything into abstract calculations that reduce individuals to data, thinking to a mechanical process, experience to isolated cases, goodness to profit, and, above all, a denial of the uniqueness of each individual and his or her story."

The remedy he proposes comes from a "[wisdom of the heart](#)" that recognizes the purpose of communication as not simply the conveyance of information, but an exchange of persons. Neither Siri nor Alexa can give her word in that personalistic sense.

Language is meant to generate communion. Christians profess that Jesus is the Word made flesh who dwelt among us (John 1:14) precisely to unite us with the God who speaks all being into existence.

This time between Ascension and Pentecost further highlights the personal connection to words, in the Gospel reading for those who celebrate the [7th Sunday of Easter](#) (John 17:11b-19).

Concluding his farewell discourse, Jesus lifts his eyes to heaven and uses words to re-enter into communion with His Father. He speaks of having given His followers the Father's word, a word that informs and transforms because it *is* truth. As He is about to consecrate himself for them in the Paschal mystery, He implores the Father to consecrate his followers in that truth, in that word, which will remain available to all after His Ascension.

That consecration comes through the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Among the gifts of this "Spirit of truth" are those associated with intelligence: *knowledge* about matters of faith and morality, *understanding* of God's will as it directs us toward our salvation, and *wisdom* to judge life in this world according to divine truth.

The Word that is Jesus and the words and deeds by which Jesus "speaks" the Father to us are inspired by and understood through the power of the Spirit. With Pentecost, the eternal life of God becomes really intelligible.

Now as then, we enter into communion with God when we heed that holy word, by sharing ourselves with others in the singularity of loving one another as God has loved us. "God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him" (1 John 4:16).

"Artificial intelligence" aims at a different [singularity](#), one that risks becoming oxymoronic if we consign human communication to technological devices. But it need not be so.

Pope Francis tells us why in the conclusion to his message: "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."

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THE SACRED HEART: THE REAL SYMBOL OF WHAT HAS BEEN AND CAN BE AGAIN

(October 30, 2024)

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur once claimed, “the symbol gives rise to thought” because its meaning cannot be exhausted by any conceptualizations.

Religious symbols do this. Candles shine the light of faith; incense raises our prayer to God above. Church architecture draws us toward the supernatural. Liturgical rituals give rise not just to thought (beliefs), but to experience (grace).

In Christian spirituality, no symbol has inspired more thought than the Sacred Heart. From the gospel account of Jesus’s pierced heart (John 19:34-35) to saints’ testimony of visionary experiences, the heart of Jesus has inspired continual devotion, evident still in monthly practices.

Now Pope Francis examines this symbol in an [encyclical](#) entitled “Dilexit nos.” Those words – “He loved us” – disclose the fundamental meaning of the Sacred Heart. The papal letters explore many more thoughts to which the symbol gives rise.

The Holy Father’s reflections draw on the actions and words of Jesus, the insights of numerous saints, and the wisdom of philosophers and previous popes. His letter intends to remind readers that “Devotion to Christ’s heart is essential for our Christian life to the extent that it expresses our openness in faith and adoration to the mystery of the Lord’s divine and human love” (n. 83).

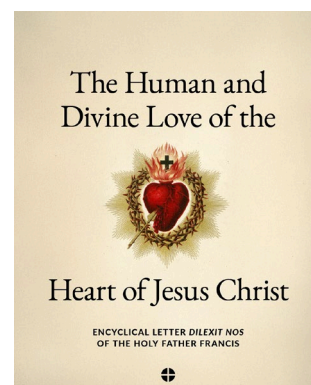
This essential devotion capitalizes on the image of the heart. It’s humanly real. It’s universally relatable. It’s central to our personal identity and critical to social interactions.

Embraced by poets and philosophers and people everywhere, the symbol comes with a cautionary papal note. Writing about veneration of the image, Francis notes that “while the depiction of a heart afire may be an eloquent symbol of the burning love of Jesus Christ, it is important that this heart not be represented apart from him.”

Yet, that is often how the image is portrayed. It is so in the coat of arms designed by Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal for the Visitation Order of nuns, which the pope references (n. 118), as a way to inspire imitation of the virtues of that sacred, suffering heart.

It is so in the sketch made by Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, the “apostle of the Sacred Heart,” following one of the great apparitions of Jesus. Placed upon altars, near crucifixes, or in dedicated chapels, her drawing invited a contemplative gazing upon the Sacred Heart that would become a hallmark of the devotion.

It is so in sacred art and has been transposed in forms as varied as insignia, magnets, or car medallions (popularized by the [Sacred Heart Auto League](#)). It appears on book covers ([my own!](#)), and even social media marketing posts ([from the USCCB!](#)).



Perhaps the pope is turned off by visceral anatomical details. Perhaps he is dismayed by “kitschy and off-putting” images that “have distanced many Catholics from a powerful way of looking at Jesus,” as Jesuit [Fr. James Martin](#) describes them.

But if we appreciate the power of symbolism, devotion doesn’t suffer from art; it’s driven by it, because of the unique human ability to imagine. However the sacred image is depicted, it intends to draw the viewer into the mystery of God’s sacrificial love for human beings. Gazing upon the Sacred Heart is meant to transport us into the vital center of Jesus Himself – which is the pope’s point of emphasis.

The Holy Father’s rightful concern for “a personal relationship of encounter and dialogue” with the Christ whose heart is symbolized leads him to explore anew two traditional aspects of the devotion, as revealed to Saint Margaret Mary (nn. 119-124), which he “extends” to today’s world.

In terms of humanity’s failure to respond to God’s love, the pope recovers “compunction” in positive terms. He concentrates on “the desire often felt in the hearts of the faithful who lovingly contemplate the mystery of Christ’s passion and experience it as a mystery which is not only recollected but becomes present to us by grace” (n. 152). From that he concludes that “love needs the purification of tears that, in the end, leave us more desirous of God and less obsessed with ourselves” (n. 158).

The pope also situates the devotion’s emphasis on reparation in a new light. He notes the “vital social dimension” of this tradition, such that “our acts of love, service and reconciliation, in order to be truly reparative, need to be inspired, motivated and empowered by Christ.” Moved by hearts desiring to return love for love, our external Christian works “need a ‘mystique’, a soul, a meaning that grants them strength, drive and tireless creativity. They need the life, the fire and the light that radiate from the heart of Christ” (n. 184).

Pope Francis has elsewhere emphasized the role of the heart for [listening](#) and [speaking](#) well in our social communications. He recently highlighted the enduring legacy of the spirituality of the heart lived and taught by [St. Francis de Sales](#).

Now he gives us a paradigmatic and perpetual focus that may well constitute the high point of his papal teaching. He reminds us that “Christ’s love can give a heart to our world and revive love wherever we think that the ability to love has been definitively lost” (n. 218).

In “Dilexit Nos,” Pope Francis helps us to find that love once again.

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