A new algorithmic 'creature'?
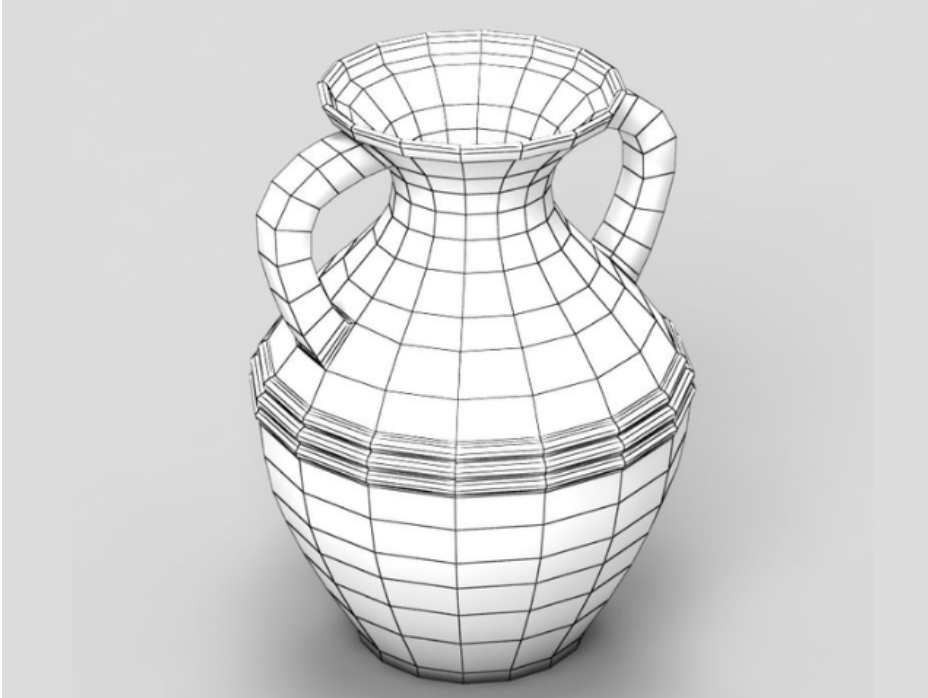
In an article published in BeeMagazine Italy, Cardinal Fernando Filoni reflects on the topic of artificial intelligence (AI) and God's creation. Since this topical issue also concerns the universal Church, as the Holy Father particularly emphasized in his January 1 message, we have chosen to share the Grand Master's text on the website for members of the Order and their friends.

An archaeologist whom I asked if it was possible to recognize an ancient terracotta artefact from a modern-day fake, replied that touch is the first and immediate criterion for evaluation. Obviously other criteria follow. He explained that the porosity of the earthenware is acquired over time and is impossible in a contemporary creation, which feels smooth. This is an empirical criterion, but it would seem to be valid as a first evaluation among the many fake objects that we encounter everywhere and that people want to sell you.

In a time when we are flooded with news of all kinds, what is a basic, valid criterion to defend oneself and distinguish real news from *fake news*? The question arises due to the great ease of conveying news. Appealing to reason is no longer enough, while everywhere we talk about the so-called *Artificial Intelligence* which can deconstruct, construct, and make news biased, even to the point of deception.

In these complex times in which so many are immersed in learning every new possibility of communicating and influencing our lives, we realize that actually the wealth that the human being carries within is placed in poor earthenware pots, according to an apt expression of Paul of Tarsus. Writing to the Christians of Corinth, he affirmed that we carry this treasure (our hope) in earthen vessels so that the extraordinary power appears, which comes from God and not from us (cf. 2 Cor 4, 7); an ancient artefact, then, our being and existence, goes back to the time when the Creator

gave it form from dust and breathed life, intelligence and freedom into it. With these gifts, in short, biblically speaking, he created us in his own image and likeness. The porosity of human existence has spanned millennia and is not technologically reproducible; even if we wanted to reduce everything to numbers and algorithmic combinations, this would always be a 'smooth' existence.

The basic question is whether the researcher from Silicon Valley or any other entity dedicated to this study that gave life to the new creature that came out of his hands, and that we call *Artificial Intelligence*, has some 'similarity' with that of the Most High God who, according to Genesis, created heaven and earth, then formless and empty while darkness covered the abyss (cf. Gen 1:2); the 'neo-creator', though very skilled, seems to me more modest. He uses creation but, because of his skill, we remain impressed; perhaps because we have lost the sense of the quality and proportions of the divine creation and we are content with the swarm of numbers and algorithms. However, the subsequent question is: what will he pour into his 'artefact', remembering that for the Bible, God created the human being male and female (cf. Gen 1:27), offering them living relationships, communion of spirits and bodies and that authority over creation from which it must not self-destruct?

Will the Bible need to be rewritten? A friend asked me. In truth, not even religion will escape the perspective of this new creature, *Artificial Intelligence*, which lacks conscience, while its sacredness remains in the logic of its seekers. Will it have freedom? Will it have prohibitions? Will it be able to commit sins? Will it be able to eat the forbidden fruit? Will it be able to love? Will it have the right to redemption? And to prayer?

Enough! Praying is the simplest and most innate longing of the human heart. No one has ever failed to pray sometimes. Perhaps without knowing to whom, as when one invokes one's mother, even if one has never met her.

Augustine of Hippo spoke about prayer, most interestingly in the autobiographical part. He did it, then, in reference to himself, with the result that he describes, I would say in a paradigmatic way, our stages of praying, which an algorithm could not bring forth from its non-existent heart.

He said that as a boy (without yet having been baptised and thanks to his mother's education) he prayed not so much through some small affection for God, but so that he would be spared, the next day, the blows of his abusive teacher (Confessions, 1.9, 14); as a young man, then, in the midst of post-pubescent exuberance, he prayed that he would not be overwhelmed by passion, but that it would not be taken away from him immediately (ib. 8, 7, 17)! In a mixture of crisis and separation from family education, he changed the content of his prayer, asking for the fulfilment of his dialectical, philosophical and careerist aspirations; but he soon perceived the debasement and vanity of such prayer (ib. 3, 4, 7); due to disappointment, he fell into Manichaeism, which was dominant at the time, almost like emancipation, and in which he found himself with formal prayers and without being uplifted; it was the cause of a new and deeper disillusionment; so Augustine confessed that he began searching, amid great pain, to understand the cause of his malaise and the nature of his depression. In a form of the highest spiritual lyricism, he confessed to the Lord: "For You converted me to yourself, so deeply, that I might seek neither wife nor any hope of this world" (ib. 8, 12, 30).

And then came baptism in the Catholic Church.

I hope that *Artificial Intelligence* will not take away from us the pleasure of those many spiritual pilgrimages that existentially pass through the lives of men and women of today and tomorrow, and that it leaves us prayer, does not reduce pluralism, nor lead us to uniform thought!

If it remains within acceptable limits, it will be an extremely useful 'creature' of humanity.

Fernando Cardinal Filoni

Grand Master

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