Francis, the comic strip
Pope Francis speaks in this still frame from a video message to the plenary assembly of the P

Pope Francis speaks in this still frame from a video message to the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture at the Vatican Nov. 23, 2021. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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The classical Christian understanding of what it means to be human provides a clear affirmation of the sacredness and uniqueness of human life, but to answer new questions posed by modern culture and technology, dialogue and compassion are needed, Pope Francis said.

"The specificity of the human being in the whole of creation, our uniqueness vis-à-vis other animals, and even our relationship with machines are being questioned. But we cannot confine ourselves just to denial and criticism," the pope said in a video message Nov. 23.

Pope Francis was speaking to members of the Pontifical Council for Culture who were holding their general meeting online Nov. 23 after two rounds of small group meetings to discuss the theme, "Rethinking Anthropology at a Time of Transition."

The discussions focused on the basic question, "What does it mean to be human?" on the way Christians used the Bible and ancient Greek philosophy to forge answers that held for centuries and on ways that traditional understanding is being challenged today.

The best response the church can give, Pope Francis said, is not to lash out at critics, but to enter into dialogue with them, trying to understand the values they are aim to promote and always finding new ways to explain "our presence in the world in the light of the humanist tradition: as a servant of life and not its master (and) as a builder of the common good with the values of solidarity and compassion."

For Christians, he said, a key component of being human is the search for God, a part of humanism that was particularly challenged in the 1960s.

Today other questions are gaining more attention, he said. Questions like "What does it mean today to be a man or a woman as complementary persons called to relate to one another? What do the words 'fatherhood' and 'motherhood' mean? And again, what is the specific condition of the human being that makes us unique and unrepeatable compared to machines and even other animal species? What is our transcendent vocation? Where does our call to build social relationships with others come from?"

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Now as in the past, the pope said, "the sacred Scriptures offer us the essential coordinates to outline an anthropology of the human person in relation to God, in the complexity of the relations between men and women, and in the nexus with the time and the space in which we live."

Christian humanism embraced "a lofty vision of the human person, our origin and ultimate destiny and our way of living on this earth," he said.

The ongoing value of that approach must be trusted enough to welcome "the contributions of the contemporary humanistic tradition and that of other cultures," the pope said. "I am thinking, for example, of the holistic vision of Asian cultures, in a search for inner harmony and harmony with creation. Or the solidarity of African cultures, to overcome the excessive individualism typical of Western culture. The anthropology of Latin American peoples is also important, with its lively sense of

family and celebration; and also the cultures of indigenous peoples all over the planet."

The key is not to give up a traditional Christian vision of the human person, and especially the essential element of being created by God and for a relationship with God, he said, but learning how to integrate those other visions of what it means to be human into the European vision.

"Now more than ever," Pope Francis said, "the world needs to rediscover the meaning and value of the human being in relation to the challenges we face."