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Pope Francis rides in a golf cart with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni after arriving by helicopter at the Group of Seven summit in Borgo Egnazia, in Italy's southern Puglia region, June 14, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis on June 14 issued a stark warning to world leaders that artificial intelligence has led to a "cognitive-industrial revolution" that could undermine human dignity, in an historic speech where he became the first pontiff to ever address the annual "G7" summit.

Artificial intelligence (or "AI"), said the pope, is both "an exciting and fearsome tool" where the "benefits or harm it will bring will depend on its use. … We need to ensure and safeguard a space for proper human control over the choices made by artificial intelligence programs."

"Human dignity itself depends on it," he cautioned.

The 20-minute speech took place in the southern Italian region of Puglia, where the "Group of Seven" leaders from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States are gathered from June 13-15 for the intergovernmental political and economic forum known as the "G7."

"We are enthusiastic when we imagine the advances that can result from artificial intelligence," the pope told the world leaders, "but, at the same time, we are fearful when we acknowledge the dangers inherent in its use."

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Characterizing AI as a "*sui generis*" tool, Francis — who in 2023 was himself a victim of a "deep-fake" AI-generated image that went viral — said that human freedom requires tremendous responsibility when navigating how to develop and use such technologies.

"When our ancestors sharpened flint stones to make knives, they used them both to cut hides for clothing and to kill each other," he said. "The same could be said of other more advanced technologies, such as the energy produced by the fusion of

atoms, as occurs within the sun, which could be used to produce clean, renewable energy or to reduce our planet to a pile of ashes."

Francis was invited to address the G7 by its host, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who said that she hoped global leaders would benefit from the Vatican's ongoing ethical reflections on the usage of AI.

The pope, along with a number of Vatican officials, have been sounding the alarm about both the possibilities and peril of AI since the launch of the "Rome Call for AI Ethics" in 2020.

The document identifies six core principles for AI ethics — including transparency, inclusion and responsibility — with a number of leading big tech firms such as Cisco, IBM and Microsoft, alongside a range of international organizations and religious leaders, signing onto the principles.

More recently, the pope dedicated his 2024 World Day of Peace message to the theme of AI, where he called for a binding international treaty to regulate its development and warned that it could lead to a "technological dictatorship" if not properly regulated.

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Last year, the European Union reached a landmark agreement that provided the first ever global framework for artificial intelligence regulation. While a bipartisan group of lawmakers in the United States has proposed similar legislation, the timeline for its consideration remains unclear.

During his June 14 address to the world leaders, Francis specifically identified lethal autonomous weapons (or "killer robots"), which can independently search for and engage targets, and called for a ban of their use.

"This starts from an effective and concrete commitment to introduce ever greater and proper human control," the pope said. "No machine should ever choose to take the life of a human being."

While the United States is not known to currently possess such weapons, there are no U.S. laws banning their development or usage.

In his speech, the pope cited a number of specific examples where he said AI programs revealed their limitations: judges using computer programs to determine prison sentences, chatbots that mimic human interactions and students who use such technologies to prepare papers.

In each scenario, the pope noted that AI offered some utility, but ultimately offered diminished or flawed outcomes.

"Indeed, we seem to be losing the value and profound meaning of one of the fundamental concepts of the West: that of the human person," the pope lamented.



World leaders pose for a group photo at the G7 Summit in Borgo Egnazia, Italy, June 13, 2024. From left to right: European Council President Charles Michel; German

Chancellor Olaf Scholz; Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau; French President Emmanuel Macron; Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni; U.S. President Joe Biden; Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida; U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak; and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. The June 13-15 summit will focus on global economic governance, international security and energy policy. (CNS/Courtesy of G7 Italia 2024)

Along with the heads of state for the traditional G7 countries, a number of other world leaders were on hand for what was labeled an "outreach" session that also included Argentine President Javier Milei, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Brazilian President Lula da Silva, among others. Francis personally greeted each head of state individually before offering his remarks to the roundtable.

The pope, who traveled to the summit via helicopter and is spending less than 10 hours on the ground in Puglia before returning to Rome, is scheduled to have closed door bilateral meetings with at least 9 heads of state, including U.S. President Joe Biden, later today.

As he concluded his remarks, Francis pleaded with the politicians — many of whom face upcoming elections and are managing fragile governing coalitions at home — to use their power in service of the common good and to engage in a "healthy politics" to navigate the challenges artificial intelligence presents.

"It is up to everyone to make good use of it," the pope said, "but the onus is on politics to create the conditions for such good use to be possible and fruitful."