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A view of the St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on Oct. 20, 2024. (AP/Andrew Medichini, File)

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The Catholic Church needs to expand its safeguarding efforts to include the new threats and opportunities posed by artificial intelligence, top organizers of a Vatican conference said.

"We are really currently in a war" on two fronts when it comes to protecting children from abuse and mistreatment, Joachim von Braun, president of the Pontifical Academy for Sciences, said at a Vatican news conference March 20.

There is the traditional battleground that most safeguarding guidelines and policies address: protecting minors from "one-on-one" exploitation by a perpetrator in their environment at home, school, church, society and online, he said. But the new frontier is where AI and gender-based violence have come together in very sophisticated ways and "at scale" that is, where the crime and its victims are easily and rapidly multiplied, he said.

The church has a role to play, he and other speakers at the conference said.

The Catholic Church must work with science-based knowledge about AI and "deeply engage in the regulatory debate, otherwise, we cannot win these two wars at two frontiers," von Braun said.

The president of the papal academy and others were presenting a conference organized by the academy with the Institute of Anthropology: Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care in Rome and the World Childhood Foundation, founded by Queen Silvia of Sweden to help prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation.

The conference, scheduled for March 20-22 at the Vatican, was to look at the risks and opportunities of AI for children and to come up with a common commitment for safeguarding.

Some of the risks include AI being used to: generate and distribute child sexual abuse material; groom children online; facilitate human trafficking; and infringe on a child's right to privacy and dignity with excessive monitoring, according to the conference program.

However, AI can also be used to promote the safety and dignity of children as well as expand their access and opportunities in health care and education, the speakers said.

But to do that, they added, there must be greater awareness about AI, clear and consistent regulation by governments and ethical guidelines in AI development.

"Scientists play a key role," said von Braun, a German agricultural scientist specializing in food security. Scientists at corporations or in academia "are writing the algorithms out of which the risks and opportunities result."

Calling on mathematicians and applied computer scientists to follow ethical rules is new, he said. "For centuries, mathematics was considered free of ethical concerns. That's no longer the case."

Cardinal Peter Turkson, chancellor of the papal academy, said church members are already working with AI practitioners and scientists "from Silicon Valley" who come to Rome for the so-called "Minerva dialogues."

These "conversations" focus on the impact of AI so that when experts go back to work, "they will be able to also influence their colleagues in the development of these models" to be more ethical, he said. However, what AI does cannot be left only in the hands of industry, and governments must address the use of AI, too.

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Jesuit Father Hans Zollner, director of the Institute of Anthropology, said there has long been a "lack of consistency in policy making and in the engagement of tech companies that make enormous mountains of money but don't invest in the safety of young people as much as they could and should."

"The church has an important part to play in this," he said, "even with all the history of abuse that has been going on in the church."

"We also have our moral and ethical responsibility to raise our voice and to point out where governments and tech companies fail" to come up with consistent and meaningful rules or guidelines, the Jesuit priest said.

Von Braun said that because advancements in AI are moving at lightning speed, each national bishops' conference should have "an AI council of scientists and practitioners from their respective country so that they have evidence-based advice in this extremely dynamic field."

These councils could function like the pontifical academies, which invite experts to provide their findings and recommendations to the pope, he said. The church should "build such an architecture in order to not only track but to influence the AI risks" and become open to opportunities.

Zollner said the Catholic Church "has a unique convening power" that can bring "together the key players that need to sit around one table because this artificial intelligence and child dignity in the digital world are way beyond the capacities and the competencies of one player alone."

Britta Holmberg, deputy secretary general of the World Childhood Foundation, said prevention starts with speaking clearly about how common child abuse is. "One in five girls and one in seven boys globally are affected by child sexual abuse. They are among us."

"We also know that technology is part of the problem, but it needs also to be part of the solution," for example, by utilizing new technologies to reach out to those who are most at risk, she said.

Partnering with the tech companies "is really crucial," she said, "because we know that the people who want to abuse or misuse technology, they will always find a way."

Those who "develop tech understand the problems, understand how it can be misused," she said, so they can help those who are trying to "introduce safeguards early on."

Because the church is influential and its leaders are role models, she said, Catholics must "speak up" and increase awareness about AI's risks and possibilities. "Just choosing to not do something because it's scary" will have consequences.

Queen Silvia, 81, "serves as an example for all of us that you are not too old, we're not too little tech savvy to care about AI" and seek ways it can help protect children, Holmberg said.