



Chapter – 10 March 2024 “Living the Special Grace of our Times”



Very dear Sisters and Friends:

I wish you all a very happy Feast of Saint Marie Eugenie!

For our reflections this year, I have chosen one of Marie Eugenie’s favourite thoughts, “living the special grace of our times.” As we are preparing ourselves for the coming General Chapter, this theme has special



significance. How do we discern and respond to the special grace of the present moment? In one of her *Instructions*, Marie Eugenie writes: “Every day He [God] makes us understand what He wants from us, we just need to be very faithful to the grace of each day. What often prevents souls from moving forward is that they do not apply themselves enough to use the present moment well.”¹ Later, she writes: “There is the joy of loving him [God] more every day, which is the special grace of religious life, and, I would also say, the special grace of the time in which we live. We live in a time of anxiety and uncertainty. We do not really know what the good Lord will do with us.”² For Saint Marie Eugenie, this special grace is

closely linked to God’s project for our times. In her writings, she invites us to seek for this special grace, feel it in our being, discover it, understand it, embrace it, and live it fully and faithfully – in a meaningful and fruitful manner.³

How do we describe the special grace of our present moment in human history/ in the history of the Church and our congregation? If I respond to it in one phrase, I would say: rapid changes, displacements, and the grace of adaptability.

Most of us have lived in two centuries – which also means in two different millennia. Thinking of communications alone, we have gone from handwritten letters through post offices and fax machines to emails and instant WhatsApp messages. We have gone from dialled telephone calls with an operator for long-distance calls to instant international video calls. We remember using the computers with 64 KB or 1 MB of storage. We did lots of work on these computers in the 1980s and 90s. We used floppy disks and CDs. And now our gigabytes and megabytes of smartphones are not enough. We have moved from live matches on the radio to black and white TVs, Colour TVs, and then 3D-HDTVs. And in the field of financial transactions, we have leaped from using bank cheques to online banking. Moreover, the ever-evolving technology from the internet to the systems of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now revolutionizing our daily lives with new possibilities.

The transformation brought about by the advent of AI promises is immense. Some of us are familiar with and sometimes use ChatGPT. I remember using it at an international conference when we had to summarise more than 800 pages in a few hours. It is used in a variety of applications, including content recognition, text generation, content summarization, classification, and translation.

¹ Marie Eugenie, Chapter instruction, December 3, 1871.

² Marie Eugenie, Chapter instruction, March 12, 1876.

³ For example, Marie Eugenie, Letter to Abbé Gros, n°7504, and *Chapter instruction*, August 20, 1871.

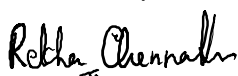
While talking about AI in a recent interview, Fr. Paolo Benanti⁴ underlines: “The rapid and global development of systems of artificial intelligence (AI) has taken most people by surprise. This rapidly changing scenario is an interdisciplinary process that calls upon different skills and disciplines, bringing numerous crisis factors and new stimuli to the table.” It is indeed naive to think of these new technologies as neutral. Because of their ability to produce seemingly real and persuasive content, according to Benanti, AIs are potential players in influencing our cognitive domain or changing not only our thinking but also the way we think and act. In the same interview, he talks about “a kind of confrontation between machines, which seem to become more humanized every day, and human beings, who see themselves more and more as machines.” And he continues: “If intelligence is not an abstract faculty produced by an organ, the brain, perhaps what matters in our being Homo sapiens, in our being a person, is also the body we inhabit. We are embodied intelligences. The medium we inhabit, our body, is not just any hardware, and that makes all the difference.”⁵

What is disturbing, moreover, is not the new technologies as such but the concentration of enormous power in the hands of a few. Talking about AI and Peace, Pope Francis calls our attention “to broaden our gaze and to direct techno-scientific research towards the pursuit of peace and the common good, in the service of the integral development of individuals and communities.” In the same document, Pope Francis expresses his concern in the prayer “that the rapid development of forms of artificial intelligence will not increase cases of inequality and injustice all too present in today's world, but will help put an end to wars and conflicts, and alleviate many forms of suffering that afflict our human family.”⁶

As the internet and digital technologies are radically changing our social structures and cognitive systems, how prepared are we today as Christians in general and RAs in particular to welcome this new era? What are the anthropological, spiritual, moral, and social implications of these technologies? How do they redefine our spirituality? How do they influence and reshape our “way of life”? How do they impact our mission of education and JPICS? And how can we include the poor and less privileged ones in this transformative journey from the Internet to Artificial Intelligence, which is set to usher in a new era of possibilities?

I hope that these reflections spark something in us. Each moment in history has a unique grace if we allow ourselves to pause and find it, even in the changes we are resisting and not liking. Marie Eugenie invites us today to embrace the special grace of our times which includes the power of this transformative technology (AI). Sisters and Friends, we have no choice but to embark on an AI journey and harness its power of transformation for greater life for all. May Saint Marie Eugenie bless us on our journey!

With all my affection and prayers!



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⁴ Fr. Paolo Benanti is recently appointed by the Secretary General of the United Nations as a member of the High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence.

⁵ Nuno da Silva Gonçalves, SJ, “Artificial Intelligences and Embodied Intelligences: What Frontier? – An Interview with Fr. Paolo Benanti” *La Civiltà Cattolica* (January 26, 2024).

⁶ Pope Francis, “Artificial Intelligence and Peace,” 1 January 2024.