



## Comment on Prof. Quintarelli's Paper

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### On Intellectual Charity

The contribution of Stefano Quintarelli attracts our attention on one point that, although not completely new in the history of moral reflection, presents itself today with unusual features and acquires a level of significance probably unprecedented in the history of Mankind. I mean the problem of the acquisition, the possession and the transmission of knowledge.

The Ancient Testament invites us to instruct the ignorant (for example **Ezekiel 33**) and the Catholic Church has made of the instruction of the ignorants the first work of spiritual mercy (**Catechism of the Catholic Church 2447**). The instruction considered was in both cases mainly a moral and religious one: to teach people the Law of the Lord, Good and Evil, and the Work of Redemption. Later, Christian Social Doctrine insisted on the importance of education for the poor and at least since St. John Bosco the acquisition of technical skills has been fully recognized in its importance for the advancement of the poor. Pius XI underlines the importance of having a profession and the role of skilled workers in society (Quadragesimo Anno 83). What we are experimenting in our age however is something that exceeds the conceptual frameworks we were used to. The first work of material mercy is to feed the starving. St. John Paul II (Centesimus Annus) tells us that the first work of material mercy and the first work of spiritual mercy are intimately connected to each other. Knowledge is the principal instrument also for the production of material goods. This has always been true because the exercise of intelligence is an essential component part of human work but becomes even more apparent in the age of the Information and Communication Technologies.

As a result of the invention and introduction of these technologies new forms of wealth and new forms of poverty arise. The **technological divide** separates those who can make use of these technologies from those who cannot. In the beginning God created the earth and gave it to the sons of man in order for them to earn their bread through the sweat of their brows. The main instrument of production was then the land. If a man remained without land he had to die. Later we added as signs of wealth the possession of money and the possession of the machinery that characterizes the industrialization age. Today the primary cause of the wealth of nations is not land or machines (the "fixed capital" in Marxist terminology). The first source of wealth is the capacity of staying in the web. It is a matter of knowledge but it is not only a matter of knowledge. It is important to be able to understand the way in which a computer works, but it is equally important to have access to an adequate device and to be allowed to enter the web, to be connected. If you are not then you are marginalized or excluded. This phenomenon was unknown to Marx. Marx protests against the exploitation of the workers. In order to be exploited, however, the workers must receive a salary that allows them to reproduce their labour force, that is, to survive. Now information and communication technologies allow a very small group of workers to perform functions that used to require before a much larger number of people. The immediate result is mass unemployment. Traditional skills that used to give security of life and professional pride to whole categories of workers are drastically devalued. One part of society becomes wealthier and another part poorer. Yes, in the long run the whole of society will profit from the change, because those who now lose their job will produce new kinds of goods and this will increase the general welfare. In the short run they will however experiment the evil of unemployment and the feeling of being a kind of social waste. A new social class is growing: it is made by those who master the new communication techniques. I shall not say they are a small elite but they are far from being the totality of the population. Those who remain in the traditional branches feel that their living space becomes narrower every day and they foster a growing discontent, a grudge, a conviction of having been cheated and dispossessed of a heritage that was due to them.

The new elite is international and goes hand in hand with globalization. If you sell furniture and put your merchandise online, people from all the corners of the earth will be able to appreciate your offer and make as many purchases as they want. If you are not online your market will be much more restricted. Few people will know about it, few people will purchase it, you will not expand your production, you will not be able to profit from a large-scale production, in the end you are likely to close your shop. Those online are globalized, profit from globalization and govern it. Those who are not online are the losers of globalization and are likely to support localist movements, against Europe, against globalization, perhaps with xenophobic and intensely nationalistic leanings.

The gap has a world dimension: some countries are more or less included and others are more or less excluded from the digitalized/globalized community. It also has an interior dimension: it splits the people in each country opposing a part of the national community to another.

This divide does not coincide with the traditional opposition of the rich and the poor, although it partially overlaps with it. If however a rich man is not digitalized he is not likely to remain wealthy for long. It does not coincide with the distinction between cultured and ignorant people. One can be well read and nevertheless be a digital illiterate. It resembles rather the discovery of writing. It is not useful in itself, it is rather a multiplier. Whatever you do, if you are connected, you are much stronger and effective in doing it.

If we are aware of what is taking place we are confronted with a whole series of difficult moral and political problems.

1. Every young man or woman should have access to digital education if we want him or her to find a decent job as a grown up. People who lose their jobs in the ongoing change should be accompanied from the job they lose to a new job receiving in the meantime an adequate indemnity, an orientation on the new jobs that are being created on the market, and professional instruction

2. To have a digital capacity is a necessary but not sufficient condition to be connected. One needs to have access to high speed/high capacity infrastructure. Some countries do not have the infrastructure. Others have the infrastructure but access is not free. Those who control access can open up the net for others, but can also claim a large share of the cake for doing that. Inequality grows. We need to give everyone access to the network at acceptable costs.

3. A large amount of value is created through transactions that take place on the net. Sovereignty is territorial and the power to impose taxes goes with sovereignty. Where should taxes be paid for a transaction that takes place on the net? In the country of the buyer? In the country of the seller? And the mediator, where is he to be located? Now, often, on these transactions no taxes are paid. This is probably one of the reasons why the greatest patrimonies of world history have been accumulated in a few years by the protagonists of the ICT revolution. Our states do not know where they can find resources to finance solidarity but great masses of wealth are subtracted from their fiscal duties. We need rules for the taxation of wealth produced on the net.

4. Those who control the net exercise enormous power. It is economic power but it is also social, political and cultural power. They decide what kind of information reaches the public and which information is withheld from them. On the other hand, they acquire an enormous amount of information on each individual. They can use it to manipulate public opinion but also to blackmail individuals. How can we guarantee that the net remains open for free competition, that is, that new actors can enter into the market and even in cases in which, for whatever reason, one operator retains a privileged position he allows all customers equal access and fair competition? How can we prevent an excessive amount of information on each individual to be acquired and/or used against him?

5. Men have a capacity to know objective truth but they also have feelings and emotional demands that something be true. In choosing between alternative hypotheses of truth we are led by our intellect but also by a demand of discharging our emotional tension. In the digital age it may be very easy to construct a "truth" that corresponds to the conscious and unconscious emotional demands of the people although it does not correspond to matters of fact. Some speak of post/factual truth. How can we preserve truth in the digital age?

Once upon a time we used to think that possession of land was the measure of wealth. To feed the poor was equivalent to giving them access to a piece of land to be tilled. With the industrial revolution we became aware of a different kind of wealth. It is the capital. In order to be able to work and make a living you needed the instruments, the machines, the credit to successfully exercise an entrepreneurial activity. Or, in alternative to that, a salary paid by somebody who took upon himself the task and the risk of setting up a company and exercising an entrepreneurial activity. To struggle against poverty you had to defend the rights of the workers against the capital or the freedom of enterprise of small entrepreneurs.

Now a new kind of wealth becomes socially dominant: it is possession of a position on the net, which implies some intellectual skills and access to the corresponding infrastructure.

Christian social doctrine has not yet taken this new state of affairs adequately into account. State legislations and international law are no more advanced either.

It is time to change this state of things.