

INTRODUCTION TO THE DOCUMENTS OF THE HOLY SEE

ALICE DE LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

Director of the Caritas in Veritate Foundation

Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) are a relatively new subject of discussion at the United Nations. The first mandate initiating the discussion in the framework of the Convention of Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) was adopted in 2013.

Although this specific issue has not previously been addressed in the body of Catholic Social Teaching, its general are relevant and answer most of the questions raised by LAWS. In the coming years, one could expect more research on this very specific category of weapons, which are LAWS.

The following selected documents however represent the efforts of the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva to urge further reflection and dialogue on such an important issue. From the beginning, the Permanent Observer Mission has been actively involved with some partner States, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots to propose a strong mandate to negotiate a treaty banning LAWS, as defined in the first part of this publication. This effort is ongoing.

The position of the Holy See has been further strengthened with the recent research and discussions on the creation of LAWS replacing the human person in conflict situations and placing a machine in a position to decide over life and death. From a legal and an ethical point of view this raises serious questioning: Are machines capable of replacing the human person in decisions over life and death and is this compatible with International Humanitarian Law? Can machines be responsible for the violations of international law? Ethically, can a machine replace the human capacity of moral reasoning?

For the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva, the clear answer is a firm “no”. The human person must remain the master of robotization. New armed robots will negatively alter the nature of warfare and have a negative impact on the human family as a whole. Thus, the depersonalization and dehumanization of warfare is one of the most serious challenges posed by modern technologies.

At this stage, it should be emphasized that, contrary to many critics, the Catholic Church has always been in favor of technological progress; here we talk about technological progress that enhances good moral actions for the sake of human development but not technological progress that does bad. The Catholic Church openly encourages the development and use of technologies that respect the dignity of the human person but not those that hinder life or can be the cause for killing.

The Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* is the most evident and current interpretation of the position of the Holy See in praising technological progress. As stated, “we are the beneficiaries of two centuries of enormous waves of change: steam engines, railways, the telegraph, electricity, automobiles, airplanes, chemical industries, modern medicine, information technology and, more recently, the digital revolution, robotics, biotechnologies and nanotechnologies...It is right to rejoice in these advances and to be excited by the immense possibilities which they continue to open up before us, for **“science and technology are wonderful products of a God-given human creativity** (Pope John Paul II 1981)” ... Technology has remedied countless evils which used to harm and limit human beings.”¹ Thus, the Catholic Church has proven in the past centuries that it is far from being technophobic. Therefore, not all technologies are an unconditional blessing. According to His Holiness Pope Francis **“technological and economic development that does not leave a better world and an entirely superior quality of life cannot be considered as progress”**.² Technology needs to be “directed primarily to resolving people’s concrete problems, truly helping them live with more dignity and less suffering”.³

In fact, the Catholic Church is making the point that we are living, to some extent, in a culture of waste and destruction. We need to oppose this culture of self-destruction and once again place the human person at the centre of our concern. Fraternity and dialogue are the best suited means to “create community and live in peace.”⁴ More sophisticated and dehumanizing weapons will not do the job.

Technical progress in the military field is advancing at a rapid pace. It has not been accompanied, however, by an ethical and legal framework capable of successfully facing the challenges of today's world. What we need today is better people, respecting the human dignity and the development of every man and woman, and of the whole man and woman, rather than better technologies. **We are technologically strong, but morally and politically weak.** His Holiness Pope Francis states that "a technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its own power"⁵. In this context, LAWS cannot be dissociated from humanitarian and ethical foundations. Hence, the dialogue between theologians, ethicists, scientists, engineers, and technologists becomes not just an interesting endeavor, but a mission to preserve the humanity and its future.

In conclusion, a "culture of peace" and an "ethic of fraternity" between people sincerely seeking to found a "community of values" can only be protected by maintaining the crucial role of a conscious and responsible human agent at the beginning of any consideration that involves the risk of suffering or death of a person. Vital decisions, which must be taken by human persons, cannot be delegated to objects. From this point of view, LAWS and any form of highly innovative armed robots are a contradiction to this requirement.

NOTES

1. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'* (102)
2. Ibid. (194)
3. Ibid. (112)
4. <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/struggle-against-culture-destruction-pope-tells-teens>
5. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'* (136)