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# Vatican Advisory Group Issues Call for AI Ethics

IBM and Microsoft have signed on to the Pontifical Academy for Life's charter on artificial intelligence



Microsoft President Brad Smith met with Pope Francis last year. Mr. Smith and IBM Executive Vice President John Kelly are scheduled to present the new AI ethics document to the pope Friday.

PHOTO: VATICAN MEDIA/REUTERS

**By John McCormick**

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The Pontifical Academy for Life, an advisory body to Pope Francis, has drafted a charter on artificial intelligence ethics that is being supported by International Business Machines Corp. and Microsoft Corp.

The charter, called the Rome Call for AI Ethics, looks to ensure that AI is developed and used to serve and protect people and the environment. The document calls for AI education and regulation and outlines a set of six principles that define the ethical use of AI.

Both IBM and Microsoft—in a show of support—are signing the document, which was scheduled to be presented to Pope Francis in the Vatican on Friday by a group that included IBM Executive Vice President John Kelly and Microsoft President Brad Smith. IBM and

Microsoft hosted representatives of the Academy for Life and provided feedback to the body as it was creating the document.

The Vatican has put out position papers and calls for guidelines in areas such as the environment and the planet, said Mr. Kelly. “But this is the first one that I’m aware of where they really put out a definite document or set of guidelines around a technology,” he said. “And also the first I’m aware of where they invited a big tech company—and follow-on tech companies—to sign on.”

Signing the document demonstrates a seriousness of purpose, said Microsoft’s Mr. Smith. “Our signature affirms our commitment to develop and deploy artificial intelligence with a clear focus on ethical issues,” he said.

The ethical use of AI, according to the document, is defined by six principles: transparency, which addresses the need that all artificial-intelligence systems be explainable; inclusion, that the needs of all people be considered and that everyone can benefit from the technology; responsibility, that the people who design and deploy AI do so with caution and transparency; impartiality, that the people who create the systems do so without bias, ensuring the systems safeguard fairness and human dignity; reliability, that AI systems be dependable; and security and privacy, that the systems be safeguarded and they respect privacy.

The principles, according to Mr. Smith, “are a real framework for the future.”

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Countries, companies and universities have all released lists of AI principles, and ethics experts note that the AI ethics conversation is fragmented.

However, Brian Green, director of technology ethics at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, says many still look to the church for moral guidance. Santa Clara is a Jesuit Catholic university.

“There are people in the technology industry, whether they are CEOs or engineers or whether they are Catholic or not...they are interested in what the church has to say,” he said.

Still, notes Stuart Madnick, a professor of information technology at the MIT Sloan School of Management, ethics can be a tricky issue for any institution.

“I don’t think there is probably any substantial agreement on most matters right now,” he said. “Maybe nobody will disagree with the basic idea of transparency, but your notion of transparency and my notion of transparency might be very different. And could we reach agreement as to which of those everybody else could agree with?”

However, he said, maybe the Catholic Church has “enough of a sounding box to really get people’s attention focused on it.”

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