

JAN. 27, 2019

Don't be an 'I Robot'

On Feb. 25-27, a Vatican General Assembly will convene on the subject: "Robotics: People, Machines, and Health." The assembly will presumably disseminate between machines that operate autonomously, those that are bio-inspired, and medical nanorobotics.

As a long-time advocate for giant, personal-use robots that can shoot lasers out their eyes and scare the bejeeses out of the neighborhood bully, I look forward to the Assembly with great anticipation.

Sadly, I won't be allowed to attend due to a pre-Vatican II general assembly anti-nerd policy. (It was supposed to be removed during the Second Vatican Council, but the "cool" bishops made sure it stayed in.)

So, the assembly will be made up of scientists, engineers, and psychologists, and not guys like me who happen to think robots are cool, but are otherwise clueless.

I just now downloaded the itinerary. I'll highlight a few of the workshops:

Monday, Feb. 25

10 a.m. First Session: "**Danger, Will Robinson! Put Down Your Smart Phone and Be Present in the Moment! Put Down Your Smart Phone and Be Present in the Moment!**"

I think we can all agree with that. They may be a "smart phone," but our constant attention to them can actually melt our brain. *A little*. Or so I hear. (I did learn that there was some controversy concerning the length of the program title. A disagreement led to a fist fight in the Vatican break room and the arrest of one Sister Margaret Mary. Apparently she has a wicked left hook.)

10:50 a.m.: "**Robby the Robot vs. the New Id Monster.**" If you remember the motion picture, "Forbidden Planet," Robbie's job, in part, was to help protect Dr. Morbius from his "id", a mental monster that is seriously grumpy. The highlight is an award-winning animation showing Robby the Robot battling the 512 gigabyte Apple iPhone XS Max.

11:30 a.m.: The opening presentations will conclude with a program about "Gort," the robot from "The Day the Earth Stood Still." This program is especially relevant to me. If you recall, Gort is a bit like a cosmic Holy Spirit in this allegory of Christ, although it should be stressed that unlike Gort, the Holy Spirit doesn't shoot laser beams out his eyes. Or rarely, anyway.

Gort's awesome. I wish I had my own personal Gort (I mean, besides my wife, who, like Gort, is strong, determined, and if I really screw up, is also capable of shooting laser beams out her eyes).

According to the itinerary, the program is followed by lunch: your choice of *osso buco alla Milanese*, *prosciutto* and *gelato* for dessert, or ... let's see ... Kentucky Fried Chicken. Hmm. Tough choice. Oh, well. It's not like I have to worry about it.

Tuesday, Feb. 26

9:30 a.m.: The day starts with a panel discussion of how annoying it is to respond to a stranger who you think is talking to you, but is instead talking with one of those tiny Bluetooth telephones adhered to their ear. The discussion will be facilitated by Dr. Philby Stanton-Smyth, author of the 1,200-page treatise, "Responding

to Someone Talking on One of Those Tiny Bluetooth Telephones Adhered to their Ear; It's Just so Annoying."

11 a.m.: "**The Early Beginnings of Bio-Inspired Robotics.**" Included in the presentation by Dr. R. "Lettuce" Romaine will be Phyllis Petrovich, recipient of the first brain chip. *Oh—I've heard about her!* According to the itinerary, she's going to recite the first chapter of "Prior Analytics" by Aristotle in fluent Cantonese while riding a unicycle and eating a salad. Dang. I wish I had a chip in my head.

Lunch is followed by the breakout session: "**Six Million Dollar Man v. Bigfoot: An Argument for Bionics.**"

Highlighting "bionics" as seen in the classic 70s TV show, the session is comprised entirely of the classic episode of the 70s TV show in which Col. Steve Austin, the pilot turned bionic man, battles Bigfoot (played by André the Giant). It's expected to be the most popular of the presentations.

Wednesday, Feb. 27

The Assembly will conclude with an address by Pope Francis in which he will issue a statement regarding the fate of humankind. With the help of a friend at the Vatican, I was able to download part of his historic address:



"There must be security for all, or no one is secure. This does not mean giving up any freedom except the freedom to act irresponsibly.... For our policemen, we created a race of robots. Their function is to patrol the planets and preserve the peace. Your choice is simple. Join us and live in peace, or pursue your present course, and face obliteration. We will be waiting for your answer. The decision rests with you. May God bless and keep you."

Franciscus

Wow! A Catholic robot police force patrolling the universe! I didn't see that coming. Let's see 'em separate families at the border now! Ha!

Someone once said that the time will come when humans and technology will become meshed together, almost as a new species. I don't think we have to be meshed together—you know, with *brain chips and bluetooth phones*—for this to happen.

I've seen it. You've seen it, too—how preoccupations lead us away from God. People are attracted to their phones like a magnetic force. Me? I traded my love for painting and drawing for the TV and a comfortable couch a long time ago.

It happens over time, so slowly that we aren't even aware of it, the pulling away. I look at my last painting. It's dated 2013. *What am I doing?*

God wants us to be the fullest person we can be. He loves us regardless, but like a parent with a child, He desires us to fill ourselves on the goodness of His gifts: our charisms, our passions, the great gift of each other. Are our preoccupations pulling us away from our full humanity?

We must pray and work to ensure that our current technologies, and those to come, raise us up as a people. They can, and they will, *if we place our Loving Lord first in our lives.*