

• September 12, 1984 •

A supplement to Catholic newspapers, published by the National Catholic News Service, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. All contents copyright © 1984 by NC News Service.

Faith Today

Adrift in a high-tech sea

By Dolores Leckey
NC News Service

Can humanity develop the moral capacity to decide wisely how to use its technology?

That crucial question would confront people in the latter part of the 20th century, German theologian Father Romano Guardini observed many years ago.

Now, in the final decades of the century, his question resurfaces. Two events this year highlighted the importance of his question for me.

First, I attended a meeting of European Catholic laity on peacemaking. My small discussion group, which included participants from eight different countries, focused on the recent TV film, "The Day After." The film raised the question: What

might life be like after a major nuclear-weapons attack?

One participant from an Eastern-bloc country thought the film did nothing to convince viewers of the real horrors of nuclear war since everyone knew it was a fantasy. I suggested that while fiction, it had a basis in truth.

Another member recalled that during World War II she had seen an actual film of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with her War Office colleagues. Though of different faiths, they knelt and prayed for a long time afterward in the viewing room, she said.

A young Greek teacher said that a kind of despair settled over his primary school children after seeing the TV film.

Later our group was struck by this fact: Our very discussion had been stimulated by technology — by films and by television.

We were eight people struggling with a common language, English.

We found a connecting link in the communications media.

These media, with all their limitations, can draw people into dialogue about their fears and their hopes for the world, we decided. They can help to expand our sense of moral responsibility for the world and for each other.

Later, when I visited a hospital where a friend was having a defective pacemaker replaced, I again had the opportunity to reflect on the strengths and limitations of modern technology.

A hospital's cardiac-care floor is a prime vantage point for viewing the wonders of medical technology. There one sees machines to steady an irregular heartbeat and machines to monitor the heart rhythms of a whole floor of patients. One sees the kidney dialysis equipment — and, with a little imagination, one can envision the devices for human organ transplants.

I tend to gaze uncritically on these wonder machines. That's why it was good for me to read Jane Brody's book, "The New York Times Guide to Personal Health."

Ms. Brody contends that much of modern medicine provides "sickness-care," not health care. Her analysis indicates that even with all the marvels of medical technology, there is still much we ought to do ourselves to protect the gift of life.

Taking personal responsibility for good health, she suggests,

means "avoiding hazardous behaviors" such as cigarettes and excess alcohol; "pursuing health-enhancing activities" such as regular exercise; and taking time for routine checkups and other protective health measures.

I find Ms. Brody's suggestions helpful in these times when we might be tempted to leave things up to medical devices. And — much like the peacemaking

meeting I attended earlier — she helps me to expand a sense of what moral responsibility means, even in a technological age.

Technology not only challenges us right here on Earth, it also is doing so among the stars. Space travel is upon us and it offers adventures of all kinds, even adventures of grace, if we are to believe British writer C.S. Lewis.

But it presents moral dilemmas. Does the technology of space travel deserve such large expenditures of money when whole populations — in Africa, for example — are on the verge of starvation?

What about space stations being used as battle stations by one country or another? Surely space technology warrants public discussion.

Technology saves lives and stretches human creativity. It also touches humanity's dark side.

That is why I believe the church has a place in the technological dialogue. The church encompasses spiritual wisdom and tradition, as well as respect for scientific truth. The church has a unique contribution to make to the moral development it hopes will accompany technological advances.

For certainly in our time, the church's pastoral concern is like that of Isaiah, articulating a vision of peace and justice and freedom for all.

(Mrs. Leckey is director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Laity.)

From medical laboratories to space stations, advancing technology is an unmistakable fact of life. But in addition to expanding our capabilities, technological developments raise moral and ethical questions. Will humanity wisely use its technology?

