



The Holy See Secretary of State Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher addresses the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2023. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

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The Vatican's top diplomat urged world leaders Sept. 26 to put a pause on lethal autonomous weapons systems for long enough to negotiate an agreement on them, joining a series of U.N. General Assembly speakers who have expressed concern about various aspects of artificial intelligence.

"It is imperative to ensure adequate, meaningful and consistent human oversight of weapon systems," Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Holy See's foreign minister, said as the biggest annual gathering on the diplomatic calendar wound down. "Only human beings are truly capable of seeing and judging the ethical impact of their actions, as well as assessing their consequent responsibilities."

The Vatican also likes the idea of creating an international AI organization focused on facilitating scientific and technological exchange for peaceful uses and "the promotion of the common good and integral human development," he said.

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AI is a growing interest for the U.N., as for national governments, multinational groups, tech companies and others. The topic got considerable attention both in the assembly hall and on the sidelines of this year's big meeting, with speakers expressing both hope that the technology will help the world flourish and worries that it could do just the opposite.

The Holy See, which participates in the U.N. as a non-voting "permanent observer," made among the most extensive remarks on AI from the assembly rostrum (though Britain went as far as to devote most of its speech to the subject).

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Outside the U.N., the Vatican has opined on various communications technologies over the years. Gallagher pointed to several statements that Pope Francis has made this year about the digital world, including: "It is not acceptable that the decision about someone's life and future be entrusted to an algorithm."

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Gallagher called for starting talks toward a legally binding pact to govern lethal autonomous weapons systems — colloquially known as "killer robots" — and for "a moratorium on them pending the conclusion of negotiations."

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres has called for banning such systems if they function without human control or oversight and aren't compliant with international humanitarian law. He has urged countries to pull together a legally binding prohibition by 2026.

Some countries have worried that such a constraint could tie their hands if their enemies or non-governmental groups develop such systems. There are also questions about the line between autonomous weapons and computer-aided systems that exist now.