

Theological and Philosophical Considerations for the Use of Digital Technologies in the Parish Context

By Petros A. Panagiotopoulos*

Twelve years ago, in 2011, British television began airing a series that was destined to become hugely popular. It was the series “Black Mirror”, in most episodes of which the predominant idea was about the possible shifts in the use or operation of the available digital tools, so that our technological civilization could be led to unexpected “new realities”. Apart from the imaginative nature of the episodes, a key question that lingers in the mind of the viewer concerns how close –or far away– we are to this digital dystopia, or, respectively, the feasibility of these transformations¹.

We have to accept the fact that these are irreversible changes, which affect the whole of our lives, exerting a decisive influence on them. Among other things, the new normality imposed by digitalization involves novel values, beliefs, language, a sense of belonging and forms of self-affirmation.

These concerns are also present in the ecclesiastical sphere, both at the general level, regarding the new ethos that is being formed in the social and ecclesiastical body through the use of new technological means, and, more specifically, in the reshaping of the pastoral practice that we are called upon to implement. Of course, these two levels are interconnected, since the link between the attitudes of individual, local and social use of the digital media is clearly visible.

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1. See Despoina Katapoti (ed.), *Black Mirror: Ο μαύρος καθρέφτης της ψηφιακότητας*, Kastaniotis Publications, Athens 2022; Iris Lykourioti, «Δημιουργική ψηφιακή απομάγευση και τεχνολογική πολυδεξιότητα», *The Books Journal* 141 (April 2023), p. 74.

For this reason, the editors of the journal *Θεολογία/Theologia* are to be highly commended for their thought to link the 100th anniversary of its publication with an impressive conference, in which the technological challenges for contemporary ecclesiastical and social life are the central topic of discussion. In this way, both the importance of digital changes in the contemporary environment and the church's sensitivity to them are emphasized.

By way of an introduction, we should note the fact that the present discussion is taking place in the midst of these changes. On the one hand, this means that, to a large extent, we've already been familiar with the digital world; on the other hand, it indicates that we do not as yet have the necessary time distance from the development of events to be able to assess their significance with some relative safety and sobriety.

We should not overlook the importance of this event: History and our experience have shown that the proven prudence of the ecclesiastical discourse is due, among other things, to the fact that it does not wish to function "journalistically", in the heat of the moment; it prefers to decide as soon as the "publicity buzz" is settled, passions are calmer and conditions are restored that favor as calm and comprehensive an examination of events as possible. As Hegel used to say: "The owl of Minerva (i.e., of wisdom) spreads its wings only with the coming of the dusk"².

However, a serious consequence of the present conjuncture is the ambivalence towards the wave of digital changes we are experiencing, even –if not especially– in the ecclesiastical body. Our discourse and practice are constantly oscillating between "techno-phobia" and "techno-philia", or, if you like, between "techno-optimism" and "techno-pessimism". We make extensive use of the digital tools available and demonize their future use. We are very seriously concerned about the changes they are bringing about in our anthropology (this is perhaps the most healthy and hopeful point of the whole debate; the ecclesiastical sphere is among those that open up the necessary reflection to a wide range of people, in conditions of extreme introversion, even autism, of the Greek reality),

2. From the Prologue of his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820).

but our discourse is ready to slip into the most schizophrenic conspiracy and to be debased by chasing anti-ecclesiastical windmills.

It would be unfair, however, for the social media to be held solely responsible both on this point and more generally on the way they operate. In most of the cases, the new digital scene is likely to highlight existing pathologies in the ecclesiastical sphere, or possibly exacerbate them. For, while new technologies favor individualism, private access, disconnection from social collectives, etc., what usually happens is the “breaching of open doors”.

We can refer to a situation here, which is both exemplary and particularly common. It is the practice of informing the faithful, especially in relation to the church news. Thus, what monopolizes the interest of the Cristian flock is the external aspect of the events, basically as a kind of “spiritual early morning TV show” (or, if you prefer, an “evening” one). Which clergymen participated in the festivities, what sacral vestments and cufflinks they brought, what were the “alliances” between high priests, etc. A random browse through the websites of dioceses or church information channels will reveal to us a sad reality: The events of the liturgical year are accompanied by a mine of dozens (sometimes hundreds) of images, some of which include snapshots of the holy procession, especially during the moments of the celebration of the Holy Mysteries. The phrase «τὰς θύρας πρόσχωμεν» is completely ignored in this case, and so is the wisdom it invokes. We are taking care to open the doors, recklessly surrendering the mystery to public view, if not to ridicule, short of «τὰ ἅγια τοῖς κυσί»³.

On the top of that, another part of the flock is systematically addicted to miracle-working, prophecy, conspiracy theories and anything else that excites the imagination and the memory, i.e. raging against “the traitors who sell out the holiest of holies of faith and tradition” and the incompetent clergymen who maintain their positions against the charismatic elders, whose individual grace they have received enables them to perform miracles, to foresee the future, and to engage in informing and teaching the Christian flock. This portion of the faithful,

3. In contrast with *Matthew 7, 6*: «Μὴ δῶτε τὸ ἅγιον τοῖς κυσί».

downcast and indignant, now associates the ecclesiastical event with a religious type of commitment and awaits every now and then the promised disasters, not with the eschatological pastoral expectation, but with the wild joy of confirmation – imitating other groups that have been denounced as “heretical”.

In other words, it is obvious that contemporary Greek spirituality displays a variety of problematic elements, which are magnified by secondary factors. These include digital media and important events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the social media promote and develop an extreme, often vulgar, hateful and totally negative discourse. This sad phenomenon is often applied by analogy to their users who are, or are perceived to be, influenced by the ecclesiastical spirit. In any case, we are dealing here with a nominally ecclesiastical use of these media and a defamation of the name of Christians. Very often, the mood of verbally abusing the other person turns online forums into arenas, even on church websites, where the development of polarization and extreme behavior tends to become normalized. As for the pandemic, it is now clear that, along with the various problems it has created, it has also revealed the pathological problems that afflict us⁴.

Of course, the central question that arises has to do with which is the appropriate ecclesiastical attitude towards these novel phenomena. It is true that the mentality of the wider social environment does not favor drastic and centrally planned solutions, and especially prohibitions. This may be a democratically welcome development, but it allows for a widespread infiltration of the church ethos with Protestant attitudes: the function and the power of the Church’s intelligentsia are downgraded in favor of the individual aspirations and interests of various sub-groups.

On the other hand, though, the nature of the issues, as they have been presented, also reveals another possible intervention – the continuation, even intensification, of the cultivation of an authentic evangelical ethos.

4. Of course, just four years before the pandemic in our country, did actually occur the unthinkable and widespread slander of an event that distinguishes the Orthodox Church as such: the convening of the Holy and Great Synod. Although the refusal to the Synod was not due to any specific and important issue, it was a clear precursor of the multiple divisions experienced by the ecclesiastical body during the pandemic.

That is, if we accept that the root cause of the relevant issues lies in a perverse and rather misunderstood reception of the church sacrament, the consistent and diligent work of the workers of the *Lord's Vineyard* for the reconciliation of the passions, compassion towards our neighbors and development of a spirit of love and understanding, despite the inevitable differences with the other members with whom we are united by the *common Holy Calice*, will have visible results and fruits also in the issue of the digital medias' use.

A healthy parish, for example, in which the pastor and the faithful are a family and are facing in common the arising problems, will also find its footing in the issues of curating the digital image of the self or the temptations created by the possibilities of digital parish action. On the contrary, in an environment in which its members are subverting each other, tolerating each other marginally and leaning towards extra-parochial authorities, they will be swayed and participate in the climate of "digital tribalism", with toxic postings against "opponents".

Apart from these, however, the period of the pandemic has shown to us that other methods can be applied. On the novel issue of "digital invasion", for example, the Greek Church sent a formal protest to another local Church, whose prelate gave online advice to believers outside his Province and country. Some Metropolitans also designated specific Parishes from which the digital transmission of the sacred services and the accompanying sermons would be allowed during the closure of the churches, in order for the spread of cacophony that would increase the sense of confusion and uncertainty of the faithful to be avoided.

It is in this spirit, to which we are referring just in passing, that it is necessary for the pastoral action of the governing Church to be strengthened and intensified. The establishment of special bodies that will thoroughly study the relevant issues and make corresponding proposals for their treatment is probably a prerequisite for the local Metropolises and especially the Holy Synod. The programs that the Institute for Pastoral Formation of the Holy Archdiocese of Athens is already developing and implementing throughout the whole territory (including Crete and the Dodecanese), with their pioneering character for the ecclesiastical standards (but also rare for the standards of the

country), constitute a shining example in this direction; it deserves to be imitated and expanded with special seminars, conferences, publications, etc.

Our tradition has –thank God for that– a rich and fruitful spirit on these matters as well. Even though such issues have not arisen in the past, we will be truly accountable if we do not utilize this spirit, or if we stand against it like the barren fig of the Gospel⁵. More specifically, it is worth remembering here that the church spirit, when it is alive and wants to be productive, does not shy away from external and social challenges; on the contrary, it perceives them as a unique opportunity for bringing out the life-giving *nama* of Christian teaching. It is neither phobic nor servile. It does not want to be either carelessly optimistic or catastrophic. It is reflexive; it does not give up the attitude of prayer for finding the solutions; it rejects the dependencies of this age; and it brings out the hope within us, by being moderate and respectful for every person⁶, in every age.

For example, Basil the Great teaches us to use the artifacts, the products of technology, for assisting us due to the weakness of our nature, to the glory of God, and for taking care of our soul. Gregory of Nyssa is more emphatic on this point, considering their use almost obligatory for similar reasons. Gregory Palamas, in fact, calls for similar attention, showing a Eucharistic spirit⁷.

Returning now to the proposals for an as comprehensive as possible pastoral approach to digital media, we would say that, before anything else, what is needed is an awareness of the arising issues, both in the degree we have seen before and in a more general approach. For example, it is necessary for us to be aware of the fact that cyberspace constitutes a new dominant environment for the meaning-making of life, which manifests

5. *Matthew* 21, 18-22; *Mark* 11, 12-14 and 20-26.

6. Cf. *1 Petr.* 3, 15.

7. See Basil the Great, *Ὅροι κατὰ πλάτος* 55, 1, 2, PG 31, 1043B, 1044B; Gregory of Nyssa, *Περὶ κατασκευῆς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* 7, PG 44, 140D-144A; Gregory Palamas, *Ἐπεὶ τῶν Ἱερῶς Ἡσυχαστῶν* 2, 1, 26; P. Christou (ed.), *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμά, Συγγράμματα*, vol. A, Thessaloniki 1962, p. 488. Cf. Al. Torrance, «Οὐδὲν καινὸν ὑπὸ τὸν ἥλιον; Ἀρχὲς μιᾶς Ὀρθόδοξης προσέγγισης τῆς τεχνολογίας καὶ τῆς καινοτομίας», transl. N. Manolopoulos, *Σύναξη/Synaxi* 147 (July-September 2018), p. 22.

itself mainly in an individualistic way, as there is an inability for a social meaning to be formed; apart from that, we are noticing the creation of standardized negative behaviors of the digital communications' users. For example, empathy and sensitivity appear to be weak; coldness and apathy are favored. The development of pseudo-intimacy as a rule also undermines authentic closeness in the long run. The "spying" on the staged lives of others in the social media cultivates petty-mindedness. The goal set by individuals, the relentless pursuit of boredom, does not allow for reflection and deprives us from the opportunity to listen to ourselves⁸.

Users are involved into new forms of commercialization, and are also subject to determinations of use by various algorithms – which are personalized for each user; in its turn, this reinforces subjectivity, and, to a certain extent, misinformation. A similar personalization of the users results from becoming almost exclusive members in like-minded groups, a habit which distorts genuine communication and gathering⁹. We are talking about the drawing of new dividing lines, which exacerbate the mutual exclusion, the distancing from the different fellow human beings, and the indifference to their grievances, while preventing them from standing aside from themselves due to their own needs. The vulnerable in particular disappear from our horizon.

These challenges posed to the modern man's moral substance require responsible responses from the Church. In any case, its very life is a supra-technological hyper-connection with the past, the future, the hereafter and the universe of the children of the Creator. Now, its eschatological "journey" has also a digital dimension, which involves a large part of its Body.

Basically, this means activating its true philosophy, which will first of all allow a different attitude towards things – literally a stasis, a slowing down of the rapid time of the age, the "speed disease" of our times; a pause that will allow the necessary neptical self-examination of the humans about

8. See Th. Tasis, *Ψηφιακός ανθρωπισμός. Εικονιστικό ύποκείμενο και τεχνητή νοημοσύνη*, Harmos Publications, Athens 2019, pp. 28, 33-36.

9. This is the "eco-chambers" phenomenon. For more details, see our article: «Δημόσιος Χώρος & Μέσα Κοινωνικής Δικτύωσης: Νέες δυνατότητες πολιτικοποίησης, "θάλαμοι άντήχησης" ή *fora* νεολαϊκισμού; Ό δημόσιος χώρος άλλοτε και τώρα», *Σύναξη/Synaxi* 162 (April-July 2022), pp. 42-48.

their desires and passions, beyond the dictation of algorithms, in order to cope with them. It also means the emergence of the ascetic practice as a valuable method of resistance to ease, self-determination and rediscovery of the essential¹⁰. Possibly, and along this line, “digital silence” can also be applied as a form of “digital detoxification”; it will not be a sort of escapism or turning a blind eye to reality but an opportunity for reflection and self-examination¹¹.

In the chaotic digital world, truth itself acquires an added value. Valid information is not just a theoretical right and duty; it has a crucial moral and social dimension: it is well established that the push to extremes and inflamed passions are based on the abuse of truth and crude hypothetical constructs of post-truth. Thus, the restitution of facts bears a purifying as well as a redemptive character¹². It is a true battle, yet it is one during which we respect every human being precisely because we recognize the complexity of reality and human frailty¹³.

The solutions proposed to these issues often create new problems. To prevent this from happening, it is necessary to adequately prepare the faithful who are enmeshed in digital communication. We must, for example, learn to respond and not to react, to resist the temptations of the barrage of rapid-fire posts and “likes”, not to be blinded by the superficial, to always remember the value of physical presence, to find the true quality of communication only through authentic love, total self-giving, sharing¹⁴, personal restraint for the sake of the Church, and, ultimately, sacrifice¹⁵.

10. See Th. Tasis, *op.cit.*, pp. 14, 17-18. It should also be noted that the discussion on the importance of exercise as a tool for the intellectual rationalization of the use of digital media can serve as an obvious example of the broader role that ascetic practice possesses nowadays.

11. Moreover, we can see from the Gospels that Jesus Himself was having His moments of retreat, reflection and prayer.

12. Cf. *John* 8, 32: «γνώσεσθε τὴν ἀλήθειαν, καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια ἐλευθερώσει ὑμᾶς».

13. Cf. the conclusion of the well-known Dunning-Kruger diagram, regarding the relationship between knowledge and self-confidence.

14. After all, sharing is nothing else but the manifestation of the divine love in our world.

15. Cf. the words of the St. John the Baptist, the one who set the standard for voluntary withdrawal from the “forefront” when referring to the Great Coming One: «ἐκεῖνον δεῖ αὐξάνειν, ἐμὲ δὲ ἐλαττοῦσθαι» (*John* 3, 30).

We owe to examine what we like on the world wide web and to constantly trust the work of the Holy Spirit, His grace that works invisibly and the consequent awareness that we are not only influenced by others, but we are also exert our influence to them: as we are inevitably interconnected with society as a whole, each of us is potentially an influencer at the local level, who can effectively contribute to change things – and this brings with it a responsibility, both for our duty to evangelism and for the quality of our speech¹⁶.

We must study digital self-control if we want to bear witness to authentic Christian ethics in digital interaction: to remain quick to listen and slow to speak and get angry¹⁷. We can implement and inspire a healthy use of the digital communication, reversing the worldly priorities of division and narcissism. Deeply convinced that the human face “has been made” for creating relationships and communities, accepting the fact that behind cables, screens, and machines there are people, and exercising prudence, it is possible for compassion not to abandon our spirit as long as we are users, and our connections to gradually evolving into real encounters.

We should perhaps reconsider, purely for pastoral and humanitarian reasons, our approach to the social use of the social media: We should accept the principle that the most lonely and marginalized individuals are mainly those who find a refuge in digital spaces to experience community, inclusion, and solidarity; we should also recognize that the sociability of our times, to the extent that it is developing through the social media, has a greater impact on people’s perceptions, and is often more effective in transforming the world than a superficial discussion about ideas or other concepts.

Obviously, these challenges have essentially more practical aspects. For example, they are dealing with defining the neighbor on digital communication platforms, what sort of humanity can be expressed by our presence on them, the depth of communication that can be achieved, the aspects of faith and witness that can be highlighted, etc. We might

16. This responsibility certainly includes concern, reflection and self-criticism on both the quality and the breadth of our discourse.

17. *Jacob. 1, 19*: «Ὡστε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί, ἔστω πᾶς ἄνθρωπος ταχύς εἰς τὸ ἀκοῦσαι, βραδύς εἰς τὸ λαλῆσαι, βραδύς εἰς ὀργήν».

be rather slow in finding the right answers; in the meantime, we cannot remain inactive. As long as people are nowadays mainly living their lives in the digital world, avoiding our presence in it constitutes a sign of spiritual laziness in relation to our missionary responsibility to be actively present in this new dimension as well¹⁸.

However, as it happens with the adventure of spiritual life, these goals become meaningful insofar as they are directed toward our neighbors – in this particular case, if we will manage to function as “beloved neighbors” and be truly present in the lives of those who are electronically connected with us. We must realize that an important aspect of our general missionary duty has to do with the rediscovery of the encounter with the contemporary people (especially the young ones) in the digital spaces they are dwelling.

Above all, we must recognize and discern the new needs that our contemporary fellow human beings have in the online environment. In an environment full of harsh acidity, our duty is to try building a culture of respect, dialogue, and friendship; to spread, through our example, the *hope that lies within us* in the current circumstances, with a spirit of moderation and respect for each of our interlocutors¹⁹.

It is said that we do not emerge from a crisis unchanged, but, more importantly, we do not emerge alone. Collective action is essential, as it allows for the complementarity and compensation of the shortcomings of each individual member²⁰. It is not only the magnitude of the challenge that calls for this, but also the need for redemption from egocentrism, the exit from the self, opening up to others, and meeting them on a path of enrichment of existence, towards the rediscovery of goodness and unity.

Thus, the attitudes mentioned above will undoubtedly be more effective if they are cultivated in the laboratory of the living parish

18. Of course, this responsibility does not weigh equally on all members of the ecclesiastical body; it is shared according to each individual's position and charisma.

19. See *1 Petr.* 3, 15: «ἔτοιμοι δὲ αἰεὶ πρὸς ἀπολογίαὺν παντὶ τῷ αἰτοῦντι ὑμᾶς λόγον περὶ τῆς ἐν ὑμῖν ἐλπίδος μετὰ πραύτητος καὶ φόβου».

20. Cf. *Col.* 2, 19: «καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα διὰ τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων ἐπιχορηγούμενον καὶ συμβιβαζόμενον αὔξει τὴν αὔξησιν τοῦ Θεοῦ».

community²¹. The Church is built through communication and bears an urgent responsibility in a world overwhelmed by communication, so that it will manage to not lag behind in creating spaces of “digital proximity”, and to develop its pastoral realism, by adopting and applying a creative and constructive approach, able to promote a mindset of reconciliation, understanding, and genuine interest in the human person.

This, of course, presupposes that, in order for the principles it announces to be convincing, they will be (at least as tangible goals) evident in its life. In other words, there should prevail an atmosphere within which mutual encounter as mutual listening is encouraged, divisions are overcome, and people are learning the ideals of dialogue and mutual respect. The value of each person should be recognized, as a world that deserves attention and respect, and as a being that is lending itself to relationship and cooperation, with duration and depth.

Provision should be made for our fellow human beings who are excluded, vulnerable, and generally in need of our increased care. The Parish is in a position to transform the ideal into reality, especially concerning social solidarity, when it implements, by using the new technologies, activities of interest, protection, and support for our brothers and sisters who are in dire straits – when, in short, it bears witness to goodness and beauty in all their dimensions.

If we recognize that the eschatological journey of the Church has also acquired a digital form, and that its word does not oppose the world but transforms it, we will find a way to break free from our complacent fortifications and make the good news heard by every good-willed user, wherever on earth digital access exists.

21. Although the physical presence and contact are unquestionably superior to the digital communication, we must not forget that the Apostle Paul's relations with the communities he had founded was also kept his Letters. For the dialectics between the two communication forms, see my comments on 2 *Cor.* 10, 9-11. For the Network of the Pauline communities, see our contribution: «Δίκτυο και Ίεραποστολή στις Παύλειες χριστιανικές κοινότητες», *Πρακτικά Διεθνούς Ήπιστημονικού Συνεδρίου ΚΔ΄ Παυλείων: «Εὐαγγελισμὸς καὶ Ίεραποστολή κατὰ τὸν Ἀπόστολο Παῦλο»* (συνδιοργάνωση Ἱ. Μητρόπολης Βεροίας, Ναούσης καὶ Καμπανίας, Δήμου Βεροίας καὶ Ἀντωνιάδείου Στέγης Γραμμάτων καὶ Τεχνῶν, Βέροια, 26-28 Ἰουνίου 2018), Holy Metropolis of Veroia, Veroia 2019, pp. 215-233.

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