On the Icon and Digital Iconicity

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The phenomenon of the image or icon has recently grown in popularity, which is inevitable, given that everything, our thought included, is essentially *iconic*. In a society **obsessed with multimedia illusions**, where visual pollution of every kind has obscured our capacity to see, it is difficult to witness a true icon. The same pollution hinders liberation of our daily lives from captivity to the natural world by means of an iconic ethos (of which the icon is an evocative symbol) bequeathed through the Tradition; an ethos that leads to the affirmation of the other, and to humility before the other, whom we are invited to "honor above ourselves" (Rom 12:10).

How do we escape the main trap of the third millennium, which is nothing less than a total **submission to the novel demand of modern technological man** without running the risk of living a para-eucharistic life? The increasing attempts to facilitate life with technological means in a **digital culture** (which allows technology with its positive contribution to enter our life and control it) can eventually lead to a loss of both iconicity and uniqueness of the person. The risk is a serious one. In an **era of trans-human technology** each of us is on the path to becoming "a tribe with one member." The **glamorization of our lives via modern social media** is just one of the symptoms of this "**self-idolatry**." The first iconoclastic controversy began within the Church, but social media may be thrusting upon us a new or resurgent iconoclasm that is overwhelming our experience with images through meaningless self-idolatry rather than viewing ourselves as icons of God. Remember, the iconoclast controversy was also about the **rejection of true images/icons**.

Technology is omnipresent in contemporary life that we must consider whether it has become **the very reality of life** itself. It is difficult and arduous to discover the manner in which to consider it both authentically and critically. The question that arises concerns a crucial theological and anthropological problem: ***can humanity change the way it communicates without altering its own nature at some level***? Thanks to God-given freedom, man faces possibilities too difficult to handle, which are paradoxical and multiple, since they simultaneously combine the prospects of good and evil. Yet, until recently there was no discussion of the danger of modifying nature and altering the human being.

Keeping **theology and communication in a synchronous dialogue** and altering the models of communications in the Church should be positive if it is accomplished with theological awareness, sensitivity, and with the appropriate criteria. Without them, however, the transmission of the message of the Gospel to the world, and at a specific time (the so-called "enculturation"), can be a very hazardous endeavor. An ancient (Christian) principle says that no thing is bad as such, and it depends on how it's used whether it will stay good. But can this be applied to internet technology? Can the Internet be good (not only useful) if we use it in a good way?

It appears that few, if any, pose such a question as it is fashionable to adopt new patterns without any deeper questioning or critical examination. Among ancient authors the term *technology* (τεχνολογία) referred to oral and written communication. However, such kinds of communication after Gutenberg still did not lead to man's *alienation* – the medium remained constant, but the proliferation increased dramatically. **Alienation emerged with a dramatic change in the use of technology by modern man**. Only as man has infiltrated **the realm of advanced technology**—the huge industrialization of production and distribution, the challenge of nuclear energy, the omnipresence of computing, etc., (and that is the moment when storage energy was introduced)—have we encountered the first (if we do not count the first *Fall* of man) serious alienation of humankind. The Internet is the climax of this process as man is alienated in a critical if not existential manner. Alienation is also reflected by the fact that man enters into a system of "communication" and cannot "self-act" as before—he must **follow a newly established communications protocol by submitting to digitalization** (as opposed, for example, to free-hand

writing on a paper, which later can be wet by a tear dropped on it). Furthermore, when **everything is *inscribed* "online,"**—and when states and their authorities use electronic information in order to interfere in the private lives of citizens for the sake of the common good—what will happen to man's privacy (the protection of personal life)?

When it comes to technology, it seems that both individual and personal rights are threatened. By emphasizing the reverence of human persons as icons of God, the Church provides our culture with a prerequisite for its very survival.

Some have suggested that this alienation is demonic, in that each one of us, by taking part in the global system of the internet, willingly becomes a *slave* of certain super-powers who might be able to form a world government, new world order or other nefarious societal upheaval (sounds apocalyptic, doesn't it?). Our evolution is strange. We are led in our days, with the help of digital memory, to **the extension of the mechanism of "panoptic control" into the past**—since the Internet remembers what we prefer be forgotten. Worse, the **Internet may be selective in its memory**.

Therefore, as with any other revolution, this one too (informatics), devours its children. The freedom, enjoyed by man until recently, begins to be lost by subordinating the person to the demands of technology, which, having caught us in its nets, **reduces us to numbers on the omnipresent displays**, while simultaneously enabling indiscriminate mechanisms for falsifying the Truth that are unchecked. Some believe the blame is not to be placed on "Facebook" or "Twitter," or other social media platforms, because a defeatist's placing of blame on technology as an undefined, impersonal spirit of history that imposes upon us certain behaviors, is not a clever justification. What is needed is a *willing* effort, because in the end we decide *how* to use our machines, and not vice versa. In **the new culture of "short (or distracted) attention"** and simulated, **virtual relations**, even time which by definition should be "free," is filled with obligations to our "connectedness," and thus it ceases to be free.

In a new world of **instant and "absolute" communication** unbound from time and space, we suffer not only from unprecedented alienation but also from **the *desecration* of time**. What has happened to the sacredness of "now?" We have expelled it, too, in various ways. Let us ask ourselves: when people obsessively photograph what happens to them now, aren't they ***postponing* their encounter with the reality for later consumption**? We can argue about this, but it's worth asking if the storing of digital material (photographs, music, movies, and TV series), envisions mere possession, which, in some cases, will become ***surrogate* for a real experience**.

Certainly, every given technological novelty brings both a promise and a risk. Many possibilities and benefits from a universal trend enabling the happiness of the individual can explain the ease by which people totally surrender themselves to **the power of media ecosystems**. Is there anybody to sober and encourage us to reexamine our newly obtained habits so that we become conscious of the seriousness of the problem of **cosmogenic changes in our cultural universe**? Will anybody show us, even discreetly, how to avoid becoming mere numbers in this technological advancement and losing our uniqueness and unrepeatability? ("New technology....always gives us something important, but it also takes away something that is important" - Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*).

In the ongoing debate over **online euphoria on the American scene**, one of the heroes warns: "**While our cyber profiles become more and more detailed, we even less see each other as persons**." This debate sometimes leads to Hamlet's dilemma: *to be* for a virtual world, supported by **cyber-worshipers**, or *not to be*, proposed by **cyber-sceptics**. It is easy to lean towards those that zealously underestimate technology, but also to those who with the same devotion defend technology, or even celebrate it. There is **"religiosity" of the text, cell phone, or email**. However, instead of escaping from the digital culture, faced with "Hamlet's dilemma" (a metaphor for **the dilemma of digitalized routineness**), one might consider a counter-proposal: when (or, better, *before*) we notice that, despite the convenience it offers, technology begins to deprive us of personal uniqueness by reducing us to numbers, then is the moment to resist.

One approach to facing these challenges is **the icon**. If the icons of the Church comfort us with a divine tranquility it is because they reveal the deeper truth. Thanking iconography, reality becomes "true" to the extent that **it reflects the future, the "eschatological state."**

But what place has the Christian Orthodox icon in the twenty first century? One might consider it a great success to see the world's largest museums offering their space for icon exhibitions and displaying them to a wide non-religious audience. Icons are no longer exclusive to Orthodox believers and their places of worship, since they gained celebrity in Catholics and even Protestants. However, in their display, meaning and reflection is blunted by a shallow celebration of an image, much like the momentary "Snapchat".

By cultivating icons, Christians celebrate **the seeing and vision of life that is transfigured** and changed in the Person of Jesus Christ. Every genuine art—and an icon is an obvious example—begins **from *nothingness* and *mask* and reaches to *being* and *person***. Apart from the extensive theological use of the term *person*, this notion is very significant in dialogue with contemporary art and science. Only with the help of the term "person" can we demonstrate the dignity, uniqueness and unrepeatability of man. With its eschatological criterion, **the icon corresponds with the genuine request of art**: in art, the reality of things is represented visually **not as they have been, or as they are, but as they might be**. Byzantine iconography conveys exactly this vision of life to the society and culture in which we live: it expresses the spirit of a Christianized Hellenism which depicts a person as it *will be*, **overcoming thus the *protological* ontology** (i.e., an ontology of death).

The great challenge that **iconic ontology conveys to our "photographic logic"** is that it requires us to consider **a presence without death**, something entirely unthinkable in our collective experience. The icon does not postpone, rather **it anticipates the future by relating it personally and ontologically**. Icons are precious treasures in the Tradition, which testify to the *personal* relationship with God, and a viewpoint that a Christian doesn't belong solely to himself/herself, to his/her job, or the ambitions of this world, but to God. Icons reveal that we are not alone, or isolated, but that we belong to the communion of the saints, who the Lord loves with such great capacity that this world, with all its temptations, cannot take away. This is, truly, the basis and goal of Christian prayer and compassion as philanthropic activity. Through these efforts one is led to the essential understanding of the relationship with God, the world, and one another, as citizens of His Kingdom that is to come.

But, you might ask, what of it? The identification of the self-sameness of Christ with His image leads to the assertion that Orthodoxy is the Church and not an ideology. It is a gathering of the people and, particularly, *a Eucharistic gathering of living icons*. This must be emphasized today: **not an Internet—on-line—virtual and ephemeral illusion of communication**, but the icon as the visible and true communication of the Kingdom; such must be the future of Orthodoxy because such is the future Christ promises His Church. In the Eucharist, we are taught not only to venerate and greet the icons, but also the other members of the synaxis, not passing the living icons—people—by, but greeting and embracing them. So, **the icon is indeed the proper method of viewing the world**. Only this iconic approach will save Orthodoxy from becoming a secular organization, conforming to the image of the world and **the "docetism" of virtual communication**.

Orthodox iconography, therefore, does not deny the digital image. On the contrary, it will affirm whatever is ontologically significant in digital communications, by **opening the digital image to its eternal significance by injecting the "future state."** With this perspective, the digital image can play an important role in **announcing the arrival of eternal ever-being**. Consequently, **the image can become an "icon" without ceasing to be an image**—only if we who view the image look past the superficial graphic and read the written icon. It is sufficient for it to be ***redeemed* from its association with the past** (protology of death) while retaining its iconicity. But, we must ask, how may the image be liberated from death and become iconic?

First, **the *paradox* of the Incarnation was addressed and resolved only in visual-iconic terms**. The culture in which we live is subjugated to the representation of reality, either as an

evidence-based representation of **how things were or are (naturalism)**—or, as a representation with **a freedom that distorts the identity of the beings** that are represented (modern art). Now, the imminent future will force us to view the world through representations of reality which will become so convincing that our minds could become utterly deceived. **"Look at me!"—the claim of the digital image**—is a rejection of the *iconic ontology* which automatically results in a different understanding of human existence. **Without its referring to the future state, every image is forgotten, becomes the "past," and expires**.

Second, an icon bridges the chasm between the three extremes (natural-modern-digital) through the intervention of the person of Christ. Yet, the radical revision of the "virtual" aesthetic can take place in a more comprehensive ecclesial context. Through a bidirectional relation established by the icon, **the "object" of what I see suddenly becomes a subject**, since **it approaches me from outside myself**, and exacts its influence on me. The iconic approach presupposes that one accepts ***a presence to which one can relate***, through **an "increasing" perspective** (perspective *outwards*.) The solution of the *increasing perspective* does not suffer from the fragmentation of information given by the optical lens (which at each moment know only certain sides of an object). For iconic knowledge, there is no front and sides and back.

If **the Liturgy is a foretaste of the Age to come**, then its entire **symbolism should point to a transition from a quotidian to an eschatological vision** of the world. If at the liturgy we do not extricate ourselves from that which we wear from without the liturgy, then we do not point to this freedom. The Church, mostly thanking to the liturgy, has a certainty that we enter the light and glory of the Resurrection: "Now everything is filled with light." But, **if we do have an entrance into the Kingdom, that implies a new logic**—an *eschatological one*.

Today's discussions about ecclesial symbolism betray the dimness in criteria. Some would like to simplify church symbols (e.g. vestments) out of ethical (simplicity of the Gospel, the world wants simply to see people) or economic reasons (the money can be given to the poor.) These arguments would have weight if the symbolism didn't have a deeper meaning (maybe we should abolish them if this argument is valid). Yet, the crucial moment lies in the question **whether adapting to history can occur without adapting to the Eschaton**, whatsoever. By the eschatological criterion I mean a vision of the world after the Resurrection and Christ's Second coming.

To conclude, Orthodox iconography emerged as an attempt **to recover the true iconicity of creation** and **to heal our damaged sensibility** by referring to everything the ultimate, the "last" (*eschatos*) act of God's will: "the death shall be destroyed" (1Cor: 15, 26). When the storm of iconoclasm broke upon the Church, it denied the premises for salvation: the whole of divine-human life and liturgical reality, the honor paid to the Saints, the matter which has become filled with divine grace, etc. Therefore, because its *truth*, its raison d'être was denied, the entire body of the Church reacted, not just intellectuals and learned persons. Truth in genuine art does not simply correspond to the mind or reality. **An ecclesial definition of *truth* points to "*relationality*"** and of common ground of existence that we share. This encounter with the divine, in paradox and ambiguity, is **a matter of relation rather than logical argumentation**. Consequently, **an iconographer interprets the event of the resurrected life** not in an individualistic way; rather, he or she, paints icons with a brush tuned to the vibration of the earthquake that raises the dead and does away with hell. Our hope is that **digital images may one day reflect this method and ethos**. Our culture so badly needs **the "information asceticism"** and **"digital apophatism,"** the terms by which we indicate **the abstinence from giving the ultimate priority to virtual reality**.

Highly conscious of this rich treasure of faith in the holy icons, Christians suitably honor the commemoration of those who bequeathed us this precious heritage, and in so doing, **rediscover this vision while expecting the ultimate transfiguration of the world** which has begun in the Church. Regardless of the cost or effort required, the awareness that man is an icon of God must be preserved in our culture.

This is the center of the meaning of the celebration of the Sunday of Orthodoxy, as it is concisely expressed in the historic *Synodikon*.