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**THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION.  
ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVES ON PREACHING,  
ETHICS AND HUMAN DIGNITY**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Digital transformation reshapes knowledge, communication and human interaction, producing both opportunities and ethical challenges for theological education and pastoral practice. This paper examines how Orthodox theological education, particularly in homiletics, can respond to digital transformation while preserving the integrity of preaching, protecting human dignity and forming ethically competent leaders. Using a mixed-methods approach (literature review, discourse analysis, interviews and comparative case study), the study maps current curricular responses, identifies practical and theological risks of digital mediation and proposes pedagogical and normative recommendations for integrating digital competence into Orthodox homiletic formation. Findings indicate uneven adoption of digital tools, genuine opportunities for outreach and formation and significant ethical risks (superficiality, loss of communal depth, manipulative communication). The paper concludes with concrete curricular elements and an ethical framework to guide Orthodox homiletics in the digital age. Moreover, it highlights the need for a renewed theology of presence and authenticity, emphasizing that digital preaching must remain incarnational and dialogical, rooted in the patristic ethos of truth and love. By combining theological reflection with pedagogical innovation, Orthodox educators can transform digital spaces into opportunities for genuine spiritual encounter and ethical witness.*

**Keywords:** *Orthodox theology; digital transformation; Homiletics; theological education; human dignity; ethics and technology;*

**INTRODUCTION**

The rapid expansion of digital technologies, social media, streaming platforms, artificial intelligence (AI), virtual and augmented reality, is not only a technical revolution but an anthropological and communicational reconfiguration. For Christian traditions, and particularly for Eastern Orthodoxy, these changes raise urgent questions: how should preaching and theological education respond when communicative rhythms, attention spans and modes of community are transformed? How can homiletics



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preserve sacramental depth and the personal encounter while using mediated channels that encourage immediacy, metrics and aesthetic packaging? As St. John Chrysostom reminds us in *Homilies on Matthew*, authentic preaching always demands personal encounter and spiritual integrity, not spectacle (Chrysostom, 1994, 89-98). Contemporary Orthodox voices, such as Patriarch Daniel, emphasize responsibility toward the human person and warn against uncritical technophilia (<https://basilica.ro/en/patriarch-daniel-orthodox-theology-technology-2025/>).

## 1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

While digital media provide unprecedented means for outreach and catechesis, they can also encourage forms of religious communication that diminish relational depth, instrumentalize listeners and obscure the theological anthropology at the core of Orthodox faith, the doctrine of the human person as made in the image of God (*imago Dei*). St. Gregory the Theologian, in his *Orations*, warned that words divorced from contemplation and holiness lose salvific power. Despite innovations (podcasts, livestreamed services, digital catechesis), formal theological curricula, especially in homiletics, often lag in integrating digital competencies, ethical reflection on mediated presence, and pastoral strategies that protect human dignity. Thus, the problem addressed in this paper is twofold: (1) the need to understand how digital transformation affects the practice and reception of Orthodox preaching; and (2) the need to design theological-educational responses that equip preachers to use digital media ethically and effectively without compromising doctrinal and pastoral integrity (Gregory the Theologian, 2002, 35-67).

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research seeks to address several interrelated questions that are central to understanding the intersection of digital technology and Orthodox homiletic formation. First, it asks: What is the current state of integration of digital media and competencies within Orthodox theological education, especially in homiletic training? This question examines the extent to which seminaries, theological faculties, and parish-based educational programs have incorporated digital skills, media literacy and online communication techniques into their curricula. It explores both formal instructional modules and informal learning opportunities, assessing how technological competencies are embedded alongside classical homiletic formation, liturgical instruction, and pastoral training. The inquiry also seeks to identify gaps, inconsistencies and areas of potential improvement, providing a comprehensive overview of current institutional approaches and educational priorities.

Second, the study investigates: How do Orthodox preachers and educators perceive the benefits and dangers of digitally mediated preaching for pastoral care and human dignity? This question emphasizes the subjective perspectives and experiential knowledge of those directly engaged in homiletic practice. It examines perceived advantages, such as expanded reach, accessibility and opportunities for innovative catechesis, alongside potential risks, including the superficiality of online engagement, the reduction of communal depth and the ethical challenges posed by algorithmic influence, commercialization, or inadvertent manipulation. By capturing these insights, the research illuminates the complex and sometimes ambivalent attitudes of clergy, faculty and students toward the integration of digital tools in spiritual and pastoral contexts.

Third, the study poses the question: What models, curricular elements and normative guidelines can reconcile digital competence with the theological and sacramental priorities of Orthodox preaching? This inquiry seeks to move beyond descriptive observation toward constructive recommendations. It explores practical pedagogical models that harmonize technological skills with theological integrity, ethical responsibility and sacramental fidelity. This includes designing modules on digital homiletics, establishing codes of ethical conduct for online ministry, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration with communication and media studies and developing hybrid pastoral models that link digital outreach to in-person sacramental participation. Normative guidelines derived from Orthodox anthropology, patristic teaching and contemporary pastoral theology provide the framework for aligning innovative digital strategies with the Church's enduring doctrinal and liturgical priorities (Lossky, 1991, 24-46).



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Collectively, these research questions guide the study in mapping the present landscape of digital homiletic practice, analyzing the perceived advantages and ethical risks and formulating practical and theologically grounded strategies for the effective integration of technology into Orthodox preaching. By systematically addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute both to academic discourse and to practical pastoral formation, providing a structured and reflective approach to cultivating digitally competent, ethically aware and theologically informed preachers who can navigate the opportunities and challenges of contemporary digital culture while safeguarding human dignity and promoting authentic spiritual communion.

### 3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of this study is to offer a comprehensive and nuanced examination of the intersection between digital technology and Orthodox homiletics, with particular attention to theological education and pastoral practice. First, the study seeks to systematically map current practices, approaches and attitudes regarding the integration of digital tools into Orthodox homiletic formation. This includes exploring how seminaries, theological faculties and parish-based programs currently prepare clergy and students to preach effectively in digital contexts, as well as identifying variations in pedagogical strategies, levels of technological competence and institutional support for online ministry. By capturing these practices and attitudes, the research establishes a baseline understanding of the contemporary landscape of digital homiletics within Orthodox educational contexts.

Second, the study aims to articulate the theological and ethical principles that should govern digital preaching, drawing deeply from Orthodox anthropology, patristic thought and pastoral theology. This involves examining the normative understanding of the human person as made in the image of God, the vocation toward communion and deification (theosis), and the pastoral responsibility inherent in every act of preaching. Ethical reflection addresses the potential risks of digital media, including superficiality, commodification and erosion of relational and communal depth. By grounding digital homiletic practice in these theological and ethical principles, the study highlights how Orthodox communicators can engage technology while safeguarding human dignity, fostering authentic encounter and maintaining fidelity to the sacramental and liturgical dimensions of the Church (Clapsis, 2011, <https://www.goarch.org/ro/-/human-dignity-in-orthodox-theology>).

Third, the research aims to propose concrete curricular recommendations, instructional strategies and best practices for the formation of homiletics in digital contexts. This includes designing modules and experiential learning opportunities that develop both technical competence and pastoral sensitivity, creating guidelines for ethical online communication and establishing mentorship and supervised practicum programs that integrate theory with practice. These recommendations are intended to support the development of preachers who are capable not only of using digital tools effectively but also of transmitting the Gospel faithfully, nurturing community and promoting holistic spiritual formation among the faithful.

Finally, the study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on digital theology and contemporary Orthodox education by synthesizing insights from practical experience, theological reflection and empirical observation. By doing so, it provides a framework for aligning technological skill with the Church's doctrinal and pastoral priorities, encouraging innovation that respects tradition, protects human dignity and enhances the capacity of Orthodox homiletics to respond meaningfully to the opportunities and challenges of the digital era. Through this comprehensive approach, the study aspires to equip both current and future clergy with the knowledge, skills and ethical discernment necessary to engage effectively in digital ministry while remaining faithful to the spiritual and theological foundations of Orthodox preaching (Nicolescu, 2008, 27-45).

### 4. FINDINGS

#### Uneven curricular integration

Some seminaries and faculties have introduced modules on religious media or digital communication. Others remain focused on classical hermeneutics and rhetoric without systematic digital components. Innovative programs are often project-driven rather than institutionally standardized.



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#### Perceived opportunities

Interviewees and document analysis point to clear pastoral advantages: access to wider audiences, flexible learning, multilingual outreach and new catechetical formats. Digital channels can amplify voices marginalized by geography or health limitations.

#### Ethical and pastoral risks

Major concerns include superficiality, reducing theology to short-form content; turning preaching into fashion; manipulation and algorithmic bias, platform logics shaping content; and erosion of communal bonds—digital consumption replacing ecclesial life. St. Maximus the Confessor reminds us that communion and love are the criteria of truth, not efficiency or visibility (Maxim Mărturisitorul, 2006, 68-74).

#### Theological framing: human dignity and mediated presence

Orthodox anthropology, dignity rooted in the *imago Dei* and in a vocation toward communion and deification (theosis), provides a normative anchor (Stăniloae, 1996, 54-76). Preaching mediated by screens must be judged by whether it fosters encounter and moves hearers toward depth and communion. Nicolescu argues that transdisciplinary dialogue must preserve human depth against technological reductionism, a vision coherent with Orthodox anthropology (Nicolescu, 2014, 35-57).

#### Practical competencies for digital homiletics

Findings suggest an integrated skill set: media literacy, digital storytelling adapted to attention patterns, ethical training (privacy, consent, persuasion) and liturgical sensitivity to maintain sacramental context even in mediated forms.

#### Best-practice examples

Institutions that integrate technology with theology combine technical instruction, theological reflection, supervised practice and community-based follow-up. Parishes pairing livestreams with small-group formation mitigate risks of isolation.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The challenge facing contemporary Orthodox theological education is both profoundly pedagogical and deeply ethical: it requires the formation of preachers and pastoral leaders who are not only digitally competent but also firmly rooted in theological knowledge and spiritual wisdom. In an era in which digital tools profoundly shape human perception, relational patterns, communal structures and individual agency, the responsibilities of clergy extend far beyond traditional preaching skills. Digital media mediate experiences, influence attention spans and modify patterns of engagement, meaning that a sermon or catechetical message delivered online can have effects distinct from those in face-to-face contexts. Consequently, Orthodox educators must equip students with the capacity to discern how technology affects the reception and interpretation of theological content and to adjust their communication methods in ways that maintain the integrity of the faith.

This formation entails a multi-layered approach that integrates media ethics, technical literacy, theological anthropology and supervised practical application. Media ethics instruction should cultivate critical awareness of the potential for misrepresentation, sensationalism and algorithmic bias in digital platforms, emphasizing the pastoral responsibility to protect the dignity of each human person. Technical literacy ensures that preachers are proficient in using contemporary tools such as livestreaming, podcasting, video production and interactive platforms, enabling them to communicate effectively while avoiding the pitfalls of superficial or manipulative presentation. Theological anthropology provides a normative framework for understanding the human person as created in the image of God, called to communion and spiritual growth, thereby ensuring that digital engagement is always aligned with the Church's vision of holistic human flourishing.

Supervised praxis, including practical exercises, mentorship and reflective evaluation, is essential to bridge theory and practice. Students should engage in simulated and real-world digital preaching scenarios under the guidance of experienced mentors, receiving feedback that addresses both content and delivery, as well as ethical and relational implications. This experiential dimension reinforces the formation of preachers



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who are not only competent technicians but also sensitive shepherds of souls, capable of fostering genuine community, relational depth and moral responsibility through digital media.

Furthermore, this pedagogical challenge extends into ongoing formation for ordained clergy and educators, who must remain attuned to evolving technologies and emerging digital trends. Lifelong learning in media literacy, ethical discernment and theological reflection ensures that ministry in digital contexts does not stagnate and that pastoral practice remains responsive to the complex, interconnected realities of contemporary society. By embedding these principles within Orthodox theological education, institutions cultivate a generation of preachers and pastoral leaders capable of navigating the digital landscape with both skill and conscience, integrating faith, wisdom and technology in service of the Church's mission.

Ultimately, the convergence of pedagogical and ethical imperatives underscores that the digital transformation of ministry is not merely a technical or logistical matter; it is a theological and moral challenge. The formation of digitally competent, theologically grounded preachers equips the Church to engage meaningfully with contemporary society, harnessing technological opportunities for the deepening of communion, the promotion of human dignity and the faithful transmission of the Gospel across diverse platforms and cultural contexts (O'Lynn, 2023, 23-45).

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Create a module on digital homiletics and pastoral ethics

Orthodox theological faculties should design and implement a dedicated module that addresses both the technical and ethical dimensions of digital preaching. This module would provide students and clergy with practical skills in creating and delivering homilies via digital media while simultaneously emphasizing the pastoral and ethical responsibilities inherent in mediated communication. Key topics could include digital rhetoric, multimedia literacy, the adaptation of liturgical and catechetical content for online audiences and strategies for maintaining authenticity, spiritual depth and relational presence in virtual environments. By integrating case studies, supervised practicum and reflective assignments, the module would ensure that future preachers are not only technically proficient but also theologically and ethically equipped to navigate the complex digital landscape with discernment and care.

Develop an Orthodox code of digital preaching ethics

In parallel with practical training, Orthodox authorities and academic institutions should collaborate to draft a comprehensive code of ethics for digital preaching. This code would articulate normative principles grounded in Orthodox theology, patristic wisdom and contemporary pastoral experience. It should address issues such as respect for human dignity, avoidance of manipulative or sensationalist communication, safeguarding privacy and consent and fostering authentic community even in virtual contexts. The code could serve both as a guiding framework for practicing clergy and as a pedagogical tool for seminarians, ensuring that digital ministry is consistently aligned with the Church's moral and sacramental values.

Encourage collaboration between theology faculties and communication departments

To prepare clergy and theological students for effective engagement in digital contexts, faculties of theology should establish formal collaborations with university departments specializing in communication, media studies and information technology. Such partnerships would allow seminarians to acquire technical competencies, understand contemporary media dynamics and develop innovative strategies for outreach while remaining grounded in Orthodox theological principles. Joint workshops, guest lectures and interdisciplinary projects could bridge the gap between theory and practice, equipping students to critically analyze digital trends and apply them responsibly in pastoral settings (Volkova, 2021, 57-69).

Promote hybrid pastoral models linking digital outreach to sacramental participation

While digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for outreach, they cannot replace the incarnational and communal dimensions of Orthodox worship. Therefore, hybrid pastoral models should be promoted, combining online engagement with active participation in parish life, sacramental preparation and small-group pastoral support. Such models ensure that digital ministry complements, rather than supplants, face-to-face encounters, fostering holistic spiritual formation and maintaining the integrity of liturgical and



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sacramental experience. For instance, livestreamed sermons or online catechetical sessions could be paired with follow-up discussion groups, mentorship, or in-person liturgical participation.

Offer continuous formation on algorithmic awareness and online pastoral care

Finally, ongoing professional development is essential for clergy and educators to remain responsive to evolving digital challenges. Continuous formation programs should address the ethical, psychological and social implications of algorithm-driven content, social media influence and online pastoral interactions. Participants would learn to identify potential harms such as misinformation, addictive engagement, or emotional manipulation and develop strategies for providing ethical guidance, spiritual counsel and community support in digital spaces. By cultivating a culture of lifelong learning and critical awareness, the Church ensures that its ministers remain effective, responsible and ethically grounded in an increasingly complex digital environment.

### CONCLUSION

Digital transformation represents an irreversible shift in human communication, knowledge dissemination and social interaction, which requires careful theological discernment and ethical reflection. Its impact reaches deeply into the life of the Church, affecting how doctrine, worship and pastoral care are communicated to believers in increasingly mediated environments. When embraced with wisdom, prudence and fidelity to the Orthodox tradition, digital tools provide unprecedented opportunities to extend the Church's mission beyond geographic and temporal boundaries.

They can facilitate catechesis, expand access to liturgical life, strengthen communal bonds in virtual spaces and foster dialogue among diverse audiences, all while promoting human flourishing and spiritual growth. Conversely, if misused, digital platforms risk modifying sacred messages, fostering superficial engagement with faith and undermining the intrinsic dignity of human beings, created in the image of God. Orthodox homiletics, therefore, faces the critical challenge of forming communicators who are not merely proficient in technology but are capable of integrating faith, theological wisdom, pastoral sensitivity and ethical responsibility into every mediated interaction.

These communicators must ensure that digital preaching remains incarnational and dialogical, serving the ultimate purpose of deepening communion with God and neighbor, nurturing the human person in their full spiritual and moral potential and transmitting the transformative power of the Gospel in a world increasingly shaped by technological mediation. By cultivating a robust understanding of both the theological foundations of human dignity and the ethical implications of digital engagement, Orthodox educators and clergy can transform contemporary media landscapes into spaces of authentic spiritual encounter, moral witness and communal enrichment. This approach underscores that technology itself is morally neutral and the key determinant of its spiritual impact is the character, intention and theological formation of those who wield it in service of the Church's sacred mission (Yang, 2024, 35-68).



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