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COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: BETWEEN INFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION, COMMUNION AND DIVISION

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ABSTRACT

The article explores communication in the digital age from an Orthodox theological perspective, emphasizing the essential distinction between the transmission of information and the sharing of life (koinonia). Grounded in the revelation of the Word of God as the source of life and communion, it argues that authentic communication has a soteriological aim: loving communion among persons and with God. While digitalization has enabled rapid information exchange and reduced physical distances, it has also introduced risks such as isolation, manipulation, disinformation, and the weakening of genuine interpersonal relationships. A clear contrast is drawn between the "living word" of Orthodox Tradition—rooted in ecclesial life, personal holiness, and the work of grace—and the "viral word" of the online environment, often detached from context, ethos, and spiritual depth. The article highlights the pastoral responsibility of the Church to use modern communication media not for visibility or immediate impact, but for spiritual edification and faithful witness. Ultimately, the digital space can serve communion and formation only when communication remains inseparably linked to liturgical life, Tradition, and an authentic life in Christ.

Keywords: *communication; digital age; koinonia; disinformation; communion; division;*

INTRODUCTION

The Sharing of Life (*Koinonia*) and the Transmission of Information

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:1–4). In light of this testimony of Saint John the Evangelist, as well as other scriptural witnesses and those of the Holy Fathers, we can clearly affirm that at the foundation of human existence lies the creative power of God - the information He plants in the world, which is life-giving - He Himself being "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6). Through His Word, God shares life, and life is nothing other than co-working with the One who has sown it and with one's fellow human beings; that is, communion in love. Genuine understanding among people, leading to loving communion, is grounded in honest communication, in relationships of cooperation, and in moral foundations

that aim at something deeper than the fulfillment of passing needs, namely salvation—the state of communion with God and with human persons in eternity.

There is a fundamental difference between the mere transmission of information and the sharing of life (κοινωνία). A living bond with God and with one's neighbor is the foundation of viable relationships. The vertical dimension of koinonia presupposes human participation in the life of God, made possible through the Holy Mysteries as living works of the Holy Spirit in the life of the faithful. Each Mystery is a form of koinonia: Baptism incorporates the person into the community; Chrismation imparts gifts for growth in virtue and service to the community; the Holy Eucharist unites the believer with Christ and with all the members grafted into Him and is the source of the unity of the Church; Confession restores communion with God and with others; the Holy Unction restores spiritual and bodily health through communion with God the Healer and with those praying together, being a Mystery of empathy and shared suffering; Holy Matrimony blesses the communion between two persons and opens it to the ecclesial community; Ordination makes the priest a servant of the community, for the full communion of its members.

We live today in an age in which digitalization has enabled the transmission of a massive flow of information, transforming the way we communicate. Distances seem no longer to be an obstacle, yet distancing appears as a consequence of isolation, self-sufficiency, and the lack of concrete communion for those who immerse themselves in the illusion of virtual relationships based on falsehood. Digitalization can reduce distances between those far apart, yet it can distance those who are very close through egoism, lack of communication, moral superficiality, and spiritual demotivation. While the benefits of digitalization are evident, so too are the dangers arising from inadequate discernment and management of its harmful effects.

The transmission of information must be correlated with the sharing of life. No matter how advanced and complex information exchange becomes, it produces an existential void if it does not lead to loving communion between persons. Metropolitan John Zizioulas emphatically states that what truly defines the human being is not individuality, but communion: full human existence is possible only as person-in-relation (Zizioulas, 1981, p.45). "Communion constitutes life. Existence is an event of communion. The 'cause' of existence and the 'source' of life is not Being-in-itself - as Being is not an absolute category 'in itself' - but divine Trinitarian communion, which hypostasizes being as an event of life. Communion, for the Church, is an ontological event, not a consequence of the ontological event, but constitutive of Being itself" (Yannaras, 2004, p.223). Within the Church, we exist only as persons in loving communion with God and with others. When information is transmitted and received for the sake of communion, persons partake of it and bear the fruit of love. According to Paul Evdokimov, the love God shares with humanity can be considered "mad," because it is given without measure and calls to the sharing of life, not merely to rational understanding (Evdokimov, 1973, p.112).

Thus, the difference between information and communion resembles that between theory and life. Information becomes valuable only when it builds the community and opens the perspective of interpersonal communion - it becomes a "word that edifies."

Christos Yannaras speaks of the "rejection of individuality," achieved through an ascetic act, namely "the struggle of the person against the rebellious nature that seeks to fulfill by itself what can only be fulfilled in unity and communion with God" (Yannaras, 2004, p. 112). Fulfillment is possible only together with the other, in direct relationship with God and with one's neighbor, through an ascetic struggle of self-denial and grounding in reality—not the artificial reality of unfiltered information flows, but the lived reality shaped by discernment between good and evil and by a meaningful life.

1. THE LIVING WORD IN ORTHODOX TRADITION VERSUS THE "VIRAL" WORD OF THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

The Church can be described as the living icon of the Holy Trinity, reflecting the communion of the divine Persons in the loving communion of created persons (Olivier Clément, 1987, p.67). She is a *societas amoris*, for within her the faithful live in communion through the sharing of love and mutual self-giving. Such a community can exist only on the foundation of the living word, which has its source in the Word of

God, eternally living and life-giving. In the Church, words are never meaningless; they are bearers of life and define liturgical and sacramental existence.

The power of the word in the Church is not measured by rhetorical skill, but by its spiritual effect - by its ability to vivify hearts and lead them toward transformation.

Saint John Chrysostom emphasizes that "it is not enough to hear the word; we must live it," meaning that there must be a living, harmonious relationship between the one who speaks the word and the way in which they live. The word "with great power" is born in the soul of the one who follows the Creator; it comes from a mind warmed by the heart, which thinks toward eternal realities and union with God, showing that the power of the word lies in the life of the one who utters it, in the transfiguration of their personal life (Maxim the Confessor, 1983, p.201). Therefore, the word is alive if it is connected to the authentic Christian way of living of the one who conveys it. The transformative power of the word, of the message transmitted, does not depend on rhetorical skill, but on the holiness of the life of the one who speaks it.

The contemporary context has brought a series of challenges and shifts regarding the transmission of the Word and the reception of its message, which calls for heightened attention on the part of those who can discern swiftly and with moral accuracy what is occurring within society. Today, we are confronted with so-called digital communication, which has gained momentum amid the rapid technologization of the population. Information - sometimes excessive - circulates at great speed and can produce confusion, be manipulative, or stray entirely from the original purpose of Christian communication, namely communion, service, and witness. Digital communication, if not guided by a moral framework and a value-based system, uses the word as an "informational commodity," detached from truth. When the Word is no longer the "Way, the Truth, and the Life," it falls into the realm of manipulation, moral distortion, and existential emptiness.

If we examine the online environment (the digital space), we will easily observe that there is a significant difference between the living Word and the "viral" word. This can be illustrated by numerous messages from hierarchs or renowned spiritual fathers, which, after being truncated and taken out of context, became "viral" on social media, receiving many likes and shares from people, yet were used to generate polemics or express irony. Such situations have led to various controversies and even conflict, as the message was not received as a testimony of faith. The living Word becomes a power of life, a bond of communion, for the faithful who participate in the liturgical life of the community, for those who receive the message of the Gospel within the context of the Divine Liturgy, rather than through a "viral" clip.

Young people are the most affected by the online consumption of so-called "religious" content: watching videos or listening to messages on spiritual themes that circulate rapidly on personal devices may impress them or provoke emotional reactions, yet without patient catechesis, without a concrete spiritual foundation, and devoid of spiritual growth within the ecclesial context - thus without a connection to the life of the Church - such materials bear no fruit. Moral progress and authentic spiritual life are nurtured "in the shadow" of the Church, through discipleship and communion with others.

The living Word must not be confused with the motivational messages that abound on social media. Messages with moral content risk being transformed into marketing products, often aiming to serve interests unrelated to spiritual progress, but rather to material gain or personal "image." So-called "influencers" may employ skillful language concerning prayer, fasting, or almsgiving, yet reduce these realities to the level of motivational slogans, thereby nullifying their true ascetic and spiritual significance.

2. HOMO CONNECTICUS, HOMO COMMUNICANS, AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The capacity of new technological means to abolish distances and reduce the time required for interactions—factors that in the past often posed challenges in long-distance communication—has brought humanity into a new era, that of globalization.

The new "global village," (Ivan, 2022) as Marshall McLuhan called it, is an environment that can place people in immediate interpersonal communication, making any event occurring worldwide known to everyone. Any "sensational" news can circle the globe within minutes. In this way, the world becomes "small" for homo connecticus, and this should often lead him to redefine the boundaries of his own

knowledge, discernment, and personal motivation. The question arises whether he is capable of making the best decisions, whether he knows what is truly beneficial for him, and whether he can build interpersonal relationships that are healthy, moral, and conducive to communion.

Analyzing the phenomenon from a religious and moral perspective, we observe that interpersonal relationships are undergoing significant transformations, in the sense that the virtual space acts on the human psyche as an environment in which everything seems permissible—a space that conceals and generates certain communicational dysfunctions. "Behind" the screens, the human being is transformed, becoming an extension of the devices he uses, even "an appendage of them, not merely their servant, but their slave. Within the communication these devices allow in various forms, the person no longer has respite—not only because these machines continuously send signals, each a kind of summons, but also because he feels discomfort in the absence of media contact. Connection and communication through media have become a second nature for him, to such an extent that, for many of our contemporaries, existence is unimaginable without them" (Larchet, 2016b, pp.98-99). Dependence on these technical means of communication becomes, in itself, a major problem. The loss of these devices, disconnection from media platforms, or the absence of a phone signal or internet connection can generate panic, anxiety, disorientation, and other manifestations with a heightened negative emotional impact.

"Media bondage" disrupts genuine interpersonal relationships, distorting them and altering communicational and communal structures. Although media is intended to facilitate communication, it is evident that new barriers to its proper functioning are being created. Efforts are made to gain more time for recreation and the strengthening of interpersonal relationships, yet the majority of people still complain of a "lack of time." While global boundaries between states seem to disappear, new obstacles to true communion are being established.

In order to counteract the dangers generated by this "media bondage," homo communicans must also be homo religiosus—that is, a person who is connected on a transcendental level, so that his existence has meaning and his communication with others is grounded in values, creating bridges of inter-communion.

3. PASTORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE USE OF NEW COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

The Church, in her missionary dynamics, bears responsibility for the proper ordering of modern means of communication. She has the duty to teach the faithful how to use these modern instruments in such a way that the message of the Gospel bears fruit, rather than being employed merely as a tool for mercantile "virality." The effectiveness of the Church's message is not measured by the number of likes, shares, or views, but by its impact on individuals, by its capacity to lead a person toward the path that culminates in a personal encounter with the Word. A message that becomes "viral" may impress momentarily or provoke certain emotions, yet only words that carry truth—those rooted in the revealed Word and grounded in the Church's tradition—can lead to genuine inner transformation, conversion, and communion.

Words must bear the ethos of the one who transmits them, or be connected through the personal experience and authentic life of the speaker or publisher. A Christian who lives authentically according to the Gospel's teachings, who makes the Holy Gospel his guide in life, warms the hearts of others through the words he transmits, creating the conditions for true communication that inevitably leads to communion in love. Such a message may not spread with the speed of a "viral" one, but over time, it will certainly lead to the true meaning of life.

Sensationalism and euphoric states often become the "signature" of "viral" messages, yet the absence of spiritual depth, falsehood, and materialism lead these messages to emotional waste, moral degradation, selfishness, and the like. Today, the great challenge for the Church is not to attempt to conform to what social media algorithms promote, so that her messages may become "viral," but rather to strive not to separate the Word from Him who has given it to us, to restore its original power—that is, to make it fruitful for communion and transfiguration.

New media communication platforms pose numerous spiritual dangers and carry a high risk of fragmenting the person (Larchet, 2016a, p.23). Social networks may give the impression of genuine

communion between individuals, yet this often becomes the illusion of a relationship based on an increased number of "likes" and shares, rather than on real encounter, honest communication, and concern for the spiritual edification of others. As the Holy Confessor Father Dumitru Stăniloae teaches us, the Word must be transformed into an act of communion through grace, not merely a carrier of neutral information (Stăniloae, 1996, p.75).: "Let your word be: Yes, yes; and No, no; but whatever is more than these comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37).

The challenges faced by religious communities are manifold. The question arises as to how they adapt to new technological transformations, and how these changes can be utilized effectively to maintain cohesion among people (Campbell & Sheldon, 2022, p.82). Furthermore, we must recognize that there are significant differences between the "offline" context—where individuals socialize and interact face-to-face—and the "online" context (Lheim & Lundmark, 2022, p.65). The Church has the role of identifying the problems that arise and of demonstrating that the digital environment must be used responsibly in her mission, but always with care for preserving living relationships, fostering sincere communication, and creating concrete bridges that enable communion, maintaining the profound connection between the Word and life.

CONCLUSION

If we wish to understand and remain within the logic of Christian communication, we must make a clear distinction between the transmission of information and the sharing of life (koinonia). Remaining solely within the technical logic of efficiency and speed detaches us from ecclesial life and deprives us of the depth of grace-filled communion. The latter has a soteriological purpose: the deification of the human person.

Although the means by which individuals can transmit messages have multiplied, the depth of interpersonal relationships has suffered. Today, we witness the isolation of the person, the loss of interpersonal connections, programmatic selfishness, and the so-called "media bondage." The Church has the duty to transfigure communication by preserving its personal and sacramental dimension. In this way, the message of the Gospel has the power to remain living and fruitful, rather than merely a "viral" message, devoid of depth, seeking only sensationalism, and provoking fleeting emotions and momentary reactions.

The ecclesial community must exercise responsibility when using modern communication technologies. Emphasis should not be placed on the number of views or the momentary success of a message, but on the spiritual fruits in the lives of those who receive it. Communication in the digital environment is not an obstacle to the Church's mission; rather, it can become an opportunity if attention is given to values and to the theological and moral significance of the digital space. This space should become a place of witness, formation, and communion, where dialogue serves as a pastoral instrument. When social networks and modern means of communication are used for personal and communal spiritual edification, *homo connecticus* enters into the logic of the human person's becoming toward the dignity of *homo religiosus*.

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