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DOCTORAL THESIS SUMMARY

**THE INTERNET AND THE ONLINE SOCIAL MEDIA AS
CURRENT CHALLENGES FOR CHRISTIAN MORALITY**

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Key words

Internet, social media, digital space, digital communication, socialization, virtual environment, Christian morality, media, online, entertainment, digital natives, digital immigrants, mass-media, verbal violence, education, addiction, pornography, cyber-ethics, netiquette, Church, moral consciousness, moral principles, discernment, responsibility.

The structure and the main ideas of the thesis

The general subject of the doctoral thesis is connected to the role of the internet for contemporary man. In the same time, this research analyses the impact of this global network on man's life, highlighting the problems of morality. We realize the benefits of the internet in every domain of our life and it is also important to understand the dangers to which we expose ourselves in the online environment. The topic has a continuous dynamism because the internet is constantly developing, which is why we need to identify new ways of answering these changes.

The thesis is structured in 3 parts, every part analyzing the different functionalities of the digital space. The first chapter focuses on the most common purpose of the internet, namely the process of communication. The basic function of the internet and the main purpose why it was created was communication. Although the subject was many times debated, by many specialists in communication, it is necessary to analyze the functionality of communication, from the perspective of social media and the internet. The general structure of this essential process becomes affected in such a manner, by the specific of the online environment, that the process itself becomes modified. Internet communication is much faster and more efficient, but in the same time we risk losing sight of the main purpose of communication. Much of the time we focus on the message and its transmission, more than on the finality of the process. In the case of simplified communication, many of the elements of communication are missing, leading to an incomplete process. Moreover, the elements of nonverbal communication are missing in the situation of online socialization, and these shortcomings will lead to the deviation of human behavior, or the inability to fully engage in the communication process. The internet has ushered us into a new era of mediated communication, limitless socialization, free expression, by diversifying communication methods and by compressing distance and time. A large part of the process moves from the human level to the technical level, which represents a reconfiguration of communication, a distortion of its purpose. Therefore, we need to review the way we communicate today, because the purpose of this process is not only to deliver a message from a sender to a receiver, using a certain communication channel, but is to create relationship, dialogue and communion between people. Thus, the purpose of the internet and social networks is to complete the communication process, not to permanently replace the form of direct

communication, as evidenced by the current trend. These technical tools must not corrupt or restructure the way we relate to our peers.

The internet and the social media manage to maintain the curiosity and interest of its users, therefore the network and the digital account becomes much more important than the act of communication itself. In other words, the technical mean of communication takes the place of the message, therefore diminishing the role of the social networks.

Socialization means not only communicating with others, but also refers to the process of integrating a person into a community, creating interpersonal connections, and these aspects are supported by the online social networks. Their purpose is to diversify the ways of communication and to give the user the opportunity to communicate in a much easier way with others, to share feelings, emotions, etc. It has never been easier to be surrounded by friends or to have long-distance friendships. But reality confirms the opposite. We become isolated from each other behind a screen, and the feeling of loneliness is felt more than ever. Many studies conclude that online socializing accentuates loneliness because it tends to replace relationships and direct interpersonal communication.

The internet also influences the process of communication in terms of advertising communication. Due to the fact that the internet and social networks are places where people meet, this is an opportunity for the consumer society to open its offers through advertising. It is not the advertising communication itself the problem, but the way in which is carried out in the digital space. Most of the time, the advertising is personalized according to the preferences and search history of each user. In this sense, we wonder if we do not become ourselves *goods* or the object of interest. Moreover, it constantly assaults the user or the potential buyer, inducing him the idea and the need to buy more. Therefore, advertising communication aims to convince and determine the person to purchase as many things as possible, not just to deliver information, so a distortion of its meaning. It does not have a general character, but is folded and adapted according to the individual's preferences.

Due to the presence in our lives of current communication technologies, the entire perception related to the communication process changes. As we use these adjacent ways of communication, we realize that they become more accessible, much faster than the traditional methods, which is why we will first use them. In the process of communication, the symbol has always had the role of transmitting information, in the form of representations or images, so it

has improved communication. Today, the internet abounds in signs and symbols that familiarize us with a simplified, minimalist type of communication, but which at the same time leaves room for interpretations. Images, icons, letters, new symbols such as @ or #, all have taken new specific shapes according to the digital communication. Moreover, the personal profile on the social networks is the one that represents us, in other words, it is my most perfect, my best version, as others must perceive me. Therefore, social networks become new symbols of communication, new standards to which we refer.

There is certainly no need to give up any of the forms of communication, whether we refer to the traditional ones or to the most current online social networks. It is important that the new means of communication not to radically change the way we communicate. The virtual relationship should not replace the direct relationship, just as the new rituals of digital communication should not be adopted into the direct or verbal communication, because such deviations also have effects on the person's morality. In this case, a possible balanced solution is to alternate the ways of communication, but also to rediscover the meaning of direct communication, which can develop the connection between people. For the digital form of communication to be effective, it is necessary not only to help convey the message, but also to create the conditions for the development of communication between people. In communication we need not only to transmit information, but to share values with each other, to fulfill a relationship with others.

In the second part of the thesis we analyzed the internet and social networks from different perspectives, depending on certain ways in which it is used, trying to delimit what are the main aspects that can affect us from a behavioral point of view. If initially the internet had limited functions such as communication and storage of information, as the network expanded globally and as information and communication technology developed, its functions began to multiply. Today, anyone can access the internet through a personal device: computer, Smartphone, tablet, etc. Gradually we have all become part of this digital environment or, according to some authors we have become true digital citizens. Most of the domains have migrated to this new environment, so that the internet has now come to be used for most daily activities: data storage, information, communication, e-mail, administration, economic purposes, entertainment, location, shopping etc. Including in terms of religious problems, the internet seems to offer solutions, proposing new forms of manifestation and digital religious content. We

can also discuss about new religious concepts such as *cyber-spirituality*, *cyber-faith* and *cyber-church*. It is not wrong to mediate the Church's message in society through the new means of transmission, but certain digital religious practices are deviant and inappropriate. Digital religion or technology cannot replace a person's authentic religious life. At most, they can ensure that people have access to certain content or broadcast certain religious messages.

The Internet replaces or takes over much of our daily activities. In the vastness of the digital space we find: international databases, communication networks, digital libraries, multimedia contents, shopping sites, discussion blogs, etc. What is indeed impressive is that we only have access to a small part of the internet, even though it totals up to millions of web pages. The Internet is the result of the technological progress, but its evolution does not stop here. There is a tendency that most of the electronic and household appliances to be able to interconnect to the internet so that it becomes present everywhere. We are talking about the *Internet of things*, the ability to have control over all objects that we use from a distance. Therefore, the process of hyper technology is in the attention of specialists and will lead us to a world of data, a fully automated world. In this context, man's entire relationship with everything around him is overturned, including in terms of his work, which becomes automatic.

Every day we process the information that assaults us from the digital environment, so we are consumers of information, as proposed by the consumer society. Most of the time the information reaches us unfiltered, disorganized, and we have the task of processing and verifying whether we are really informed or not. The temptation is to take the information as we find it presented, without going through the filter of our own reasoning, which can sometimes lead to disinformation. To inform does not mean to know, because knowledge is based on processing the message through the exercise of logic and thinking. The Internet provides us a kind of encyclopedic knowledge, and the information that comes through the Internet, in rapid succession, does not have time to settle in the brain. Moreover, we can use information to inform others or we can use it to misinform, to influence, and in this trap are often attracted young Internet users. The Internet also offers us the possibility to hide or falsify the profile or the sources of information, therefore using it for immoral purposes.

As the use of the Internet becomes a growing need for us, this environment will tend to become a natural, imperceptible thing, without which we will not be able to imagine our daily existence. The more we depend on this environment, the more it will become an invisible

environment for us. Some might say that the internet is virtual and everything that happens there remains simulated, but the digital space is constantly operated by real people who communicate in real time. We are surrounded by the electromagnetic waves of this network, so it is already part of our environment, of our lives, just like the air that we breathe. The line between the real and the virtual has become increasingly blurred as the internet has entered our lives. Another aspect mentioned in the study is the fact that the internet manages to familiarize us with the rule of total transparency, through our public self-display, so that nothing remains hidden, private and intimate. We need to know everything about others, just as others need to know everything about us. Through information and communication technology we have become accustomed to a transparent, illusory, virtual world, full of tempting projections, a world that has changed our entire perception of the real world in which we live. In this artificial environment, we often simulate and mirror aspects of life, but in a distorted, apparent and even falsified way. It has been reached the stage where artificial intelligence has the ability to mimic certain behaviors of the human brain, but it will not be able to fully mimic the complexity of the human being. Also, virtual reality technology will not be able to project man indefinitely into another world, but will only partially stimulate his senses. The optimal framework for human development and fulfillment remains the natural framework, the one created by God, and the human mind endowed with the capacity of reasoning, discernment and consciousness will not be able to be rendered by current technology. These capabilities are the solution so that the contemporary technology does not divert man from his main goal.

Many of the specialists have analyzed the educational potential of the Internet, and a series of studies draw attention to some important aspects regarding the use of the new information technology for this purpose. Some of them tip the balance towards the usefulness of these teaching-learning means, considering that it is important to adopt them in various forms in the formative process of young people. The main advantages are: accessibility, the possibility of instant communication, access to digital libraries and teaching materials. Both teachers and pupils or students can benefit from the resources of the global network for the purpose of academic training. The new technologies are present in many of the classrooms, and the younger generation seems to be easily accustomed to these new methods of education, based on the use of computers and information technology. On the other hand, there are also warning signs regarding the use of current methods in education. Experts point out that excessive computer use brings

lower results over time in terms of youth performance. Certain cognitive abilities can fade when we rely only on these ways of information. The brain cannot adapt to the necessity of processing the huge volume of information in digital space, and the information is often unstructured and chaotic. Of course, it is important for young people to have increased computer skills, due to the fact that many of today's jobs require this. However, it is necessary that the new means do not replace the traditional methods of formation, especially the student's relationship with: the teacher, the school, the Church, the family, the central pillars of education.

What kind of culture propagates these new media? They certainly open up to a new culture whose specificity or values are different from traditional values. It is a culture of numbers, speed, a kind of unstable and morally relative culture. At a detailed analysis we will find that information is not enough to form a rich culture. The new media rather support the values of today's secularized, multicultural society. We are witnessing a process of cultural degradation by standardizing new values and replacing the traditional ones. The responsibility of contemporary man is also to ensure that today's digital tools truly contribute to the formation and education of a solid culture based on moral, ethical, social, ethnic values.

Also in connection with the relationship between the digital space and the process of education, it is important to highlight the ways in which the Internet influences certain education-specific processes, namely reading and writing. Many of the authors have noticed that reading is done at a much faster pace, given the volume of information waiting to be processed, and this means that we do not delve into the depth of the text. On the other hand, in an environment where the image prevails, reading falls into the background, so young people prefer to watch a documentary, film or image than to go through a written material. In the same time, writing is becoming a problem for users of the digital space. It becomes abbreviated, using expressions or symbols specific to the digital space, emptied of depth and poor in nuances. There is even the temptation to appropriate materials and information already processed on the Internet and this means plagiarism or intellectual theft. Handwriting is gradually being replaced by writing on a computer or on the Smartphone, sometimes much faster and more efficiently. Under these conditions the mind does not develop normally, and the creative capacity becomes blurred.

In this chapter we also debated the relationship between contemporary man and time, but also the way in which the new means of information are interposed in this relation. Today, time is perceived as an enemy, not as a chance or opportunity to advance to redemption. We are

willing to do as many things as possible in a short period of time, in order to save time. Moreover, current technology gives us the opportunity to perform several operations simultaneously (multi-tasking), but we will notice that time is still not enough. The Internet helps in some cases to save time, although it offers other time-consuming activities. Our perception of time is distorted when we surf on the internet, so that seconds turn into minutes, and minutes into hours, without actually realizing it. In this case, a possible solution is to establish a strict schedule for the use of new means or to alternate the time spent online with other recreational activities.

Online social networks fulfill not only the function of communication, as we mentioned, but also that of information or even social mobilization. Users have the freedom to express themselves on any topic: political, cultural, social, religious etc. Some topics cause real conflicts between users, and they have the opportunity to contribute together to the spread of general attitudes. At the same time, social networks can be tools of manipulation and misinformation. All this force of mobilization of the new social networks must be directed towards the promotion of good, order and truth. These tools also need to be used to promote Christian values and to help build communities. Using them for the benefit of the Church, social networks can help maintain and diversify relationships between members of parish communities. Informing the faithful, promoting Christian philanthropy and distributing religious content are just a few examples of how the Church can be present in the digital space.

Internet addiction is another topic found in the attention of specialists. Due to the fact that the internet abounds in interactive impulses (stimuli), it is addictive. The more frequent the interaction with the digital space, the more the addiction becomes more accentuated. The short moments of pleasure and fun gained online are constantly required, producing addiction, like narcotics do in our body. It is difficult to give up and it is equally difficult to stay away from new technologies for a longer period of time. Addiction gradually leads to isolation, loneliness, anxiety, depression etc; it weakens the body and changes the behavior and the perception of the world. It is important to verify what the main causes are, but also the effects that computer addiction produces, in order to establish a way to avoid possible serious problems. Thus, self-knowledge, the exercise of discernment and personal will are the most viable solutions to overpass addiction, because for each user the state of dependence has certain specificity. Also, a

good management of the time spent online can save us from certain inconveniences caused by the addiction to this electronic environment.

Due to the fact that we tend to spend more time online than offline, we self-isolate ourselves in this environment where we try to be seen by others. If until now we interacted with the world directly, in person, from now on we interact with the world indirectly, through the technology of social networks. Also, video games are those that project the users into virtual worlds, causing them to adopt some deviant behaviors.

Many of the specialists have noticed an erroneous, immoral behavior, which frequently takes place on social networks. We are speaking about verbal violence. This type of behavior has particularly serious effects on the verbally abused person, inducing fear and the tendency to hide from others. In this case, the most exposed are children or young people, for which they need the attention and education of their parents.

The Internet is used daily for entertainment purposes. An interactive environment, loaded with all kinds of content, sometimes demanding, but an environment that attracts us through its diversity. We often refer to this environment as a refuge from daily stress, a way to relax and unwind by watching interactive content: movies, videos, music of all kinds, video games, social networks, texts, images, etc. Problems start to arise when we spend many hours looking for funny content that maintains the state of amusement. This creates a vicious circle of addiction to spontaneous happiness, which makes us tired, burdens us and exhausts us even more. All this proves that the Internet is the quintessential object of satisfying the needs and pleasures of contemporary man. A proof of this is the consumption of pornographic materials spread on the Internet in various forms. The porn industry uses the global network to distribute pornographic movies and images, as well as virtual video chat rooms. This disease of the present century has particularly serious effects on internet users, especially on young people who are constantly searching to satisfy their pleasures. Certainly the consumption of pornography is a sin that creates addiction, a moral degradation of man that leads to physical, family, social, but also psychological effects. Educating young people in the spirit of moral values is essential to face these challenges of the digital space, and for adults it is necessary to exercise restraint to get out from these unwanted situations.

There is a need more than ever for the formulation and application of a digital ethic or a code of ethical norms that delimits certain behaviors in the digital space. In this regard, many of

the specialists propose several sets of ethical norms that aim at the general conduct of users in the digital environment. In any context, the moral charge or the morale value of the deed is conferred by the user, and he must be fully aware of the effects of his acts. In this sense, cyber-ethics, meaning the application of ethics in the context of information and communication technology, highlights some important aspects. For example, in the digital space, respect for other users must prevail. Intimidation, manipulation, misinformation, harassment, vulgarity, verbal violence, incitement to hatred, humiliation, blackmail, information theft, hacking, fraud, etc., are attitudes that must be avoided at all costs because they cause disorder and spread immorality in society. On the other hand, we are speaking of a code of good manners or positive attitudes that users are encouraged to adopt in their interaction with the digital space. Politeness, fairness, honesty, prudence, sincerity, harmony, peace, esteem, forgiveness and love are just a few moral principles that should be applied in our daily work in the digital space and in our interaction with other users.

The Third Chapter of the study presents and delimits the correct attitude of the Christian in relation to the digital space. The first part of this section analyzes the new forms of religious manifestation encountered in the online environment, or more precisely the current religious specifics under the influence of new communication and information technologies. Social networks become true religions that sum up millions of "followers" or "worshippers", and at the same time users create a new cult, namely the cult of their own ego served at the extreme level. The list of the most frequent online searches also includes religious issues, a sign that contemporary man has not given up looking for important answers, only that the Internet does not always offer the most correct answers. The church is entitled to approach and become more and more present in the digital space, even if it will not give up being present in the real world. Many religions and sects offer online prayers, services, and meetings, but religious experience and worship cannot be fully transposed into the virtual environment. These deviations from normality do nothing but to impoverish the spirituality of contemporary man, further accentuating the existential void. Thus, we speak in our age of different phenomena such as: cyber-religion, cyber-worship, cyber-church, but all these are rather forms of pseudo-religiosity, because they try to imitate or transpose religious life and experience in an artificial way, in the online environment.

Christianity proposes, especially through the two pillars of Orthodoxy and Catholicism, an open, balanced and responsible way, when we refer to the new technologies of communication and information. It is necessary for the Church to be present in various forms in the online environment, not only through the traditional media, because in the digital space Christians are also present, as well as in the offline life. The Internet can help spread the message of the gospel, keep in touch with other users, catechize, organize at the parish level, mobilize for cultural, philanthropic, and social purposes, and so on. The purpose of this tool is to simplify human activities and operations, not to create other types of barriers.

In this section, the position of the Romanian Orthodox Church regarding the Internet and the means of transmitting the Christian message was analyzed. Although there was initially a reluctance to open up the Church to the new media, today there are many ways and digital resources that support the Church's mission in society. The position of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Pan-Orthodox Synod in Crete, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the American Orthodox Church were also analyzed, all of them signaling the importance of moral discernment in the use of current means of communication and information, both for believers and for members of the clergy.

In the same way, the position of the Roman Catholic Church was analyzed, and the central idea is the importance of exploiting the new means of communication and putting them in the service of the Church, dialogue, Christian unity, broadening the cultural horizon and so on.

Christians or the users of the digital space have a duty to identify the optimal ways to benefit from the resources of current technology, directing them to their moral edification, by exercising personal discernment, responsibly. We need to approach the new ways of communicating, informing and entertaining wisely. We must constantly consider the impact of any gesture on ourselves and those around us.

Although there is no clear recipe or standard for internet use, minimizing network usage time will have beneficial effects. As we can see, there are different ways to use the Internet, depending on the particularities of each generation. Young people or digital natives use the Internet much more frequently than digital immigrants, and in turn, digital immigrants show more security and maturity in using the Internet. Cultivating discernment and moral conscience is important for any type of user.

Such an approach, based on the fundamental principles of Christian morality, is able to provide appropriate solutions in any situation of life. Self-control, prudence, flexibility and many others are elements that we must take into account in our contact with the digital space. When we seek to do good and to be close to others, the internet is certainly useful to us. That is why the responsibility lies with each user. It depends on each person what kind of environment they create around them, one that promotes good and beauty, or on the contrary, a toxic environment that generates distance and evil?

Fairness, truth, compassion, benevolence, humility, altruism, meekness, gentleness, patience, decency, gratitude, sociability, help, modesty, temperance, simplicity are some of the moral principles that must be taken into account when using digital space, in order that our experience with it will be beautiful and uplifting. Therefore, a solid moral conscience, based on these principles, is not vulnerable to the dangers of the digital space, but is able to respond pertinently to any situation.