

Why Christianity Needs Culture

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The thematic horizon proposed by the title is too vast and complex to allow an exhaustive treatment or a complete descriptive map, as is clear from the immense bibliography. The socio-cultural landscape, unlike that of past eras, is indeed mobile and marked by accelerating developments, new phenomena, and a frenetic evolution of the fundamental structures themselves. Such an evolution begins, first and foremost, with a necessary premise, however obvious, concerning the very notion of “culture.”

1. “Culture”: An Anthropological Concept

When the term was coined in eighteenth-century Germany (*Cultur*, which later became *Kultur*), the underlying concept was clear and defined: it embraced the high intellectual horizon, the aristocracy of thought, art, science, and humanism. For decades, however, this category has been “democratized;” it has expanded its boundaries and taken on more anthropological characteristics in general, so much so that the adjective “transverse” has now been adopted to indicate the multiplicity of areas and human experiences that it “crosses through.”

Indeed, classifications can embrace entire systems. Let us think of subjective-personal patrimony as well as cognitive-intellectual and practical (philosophical, scientific, literary, artistic, technical, all the way down to bodybuilding, etc.). But let us also think of the immense objective-historical sphere (prehistoric, classical, medieval, renaissance, modern culture, and so forth), as well as social (farming, industrial, mass, etc.), national (Italian, French, Russian, English, etc.), and continental (African, Asian, Latin American, and so on). And yet, this fluidity and generality or, if you will, “generalism” brings us back to the classical conception when other very significant synonymous terms were in force: think of the Greek *paideia*, the Latin *humanitas*, or our “civilization” (preferred, for example, by Pius XII). Indeed, despite being of Latin origin, the Latin term *cultura* is attested to only by Cicero in *Tusculanae disputationes* (I, 3) as *agri cultura*, that is to say, cultivation of the fields, and metaphorically applied to philosophy, *cultura animi*.

It is in this broader and more anthropological perspective that the word “culture” had already been accepted with conviction by the Second Vatican Council which, just as in the magisterium of Paul VI, is repeated ninety-one times in its documents. Starting from the Council itself with *Gaudium et Spes*, the

theme was subsequently developed in various documents of the Magisterium, including encyclicals and apostolic exhortations, to arrive at further authoritative ecclesial texts, up to *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis. In this way, a real thematic rainbow has been made that can also acquire a theological and pastoral value. As St. John Paul II expressed in his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations (1995), “any culture is an effort of reflection on the mystery of the world and in particular of man: it is a way of giving expression to the transcendent dimension of human life. The heart of every culture is constituted by its approach to the greatest of mysteries, the mystery of God.”¹

Along these lines – starting in the 1950s – the theological-pastoral theme of inculturation developed, which the same pontiff defined in *Slavorum Apostoli* (1985) as the “incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures as well as their introduction into the life of the Church,”² a dialogical movement of exchange, therefore, whereby – as the pope himself had declared to the bishops of Kenya in 1980 – “a culture, transformed and regenerated by the Gospel, produces from its own tradition original expressions of life, celebration, and Christian thought.” The term “inculturation” has thus taken on a connotation above all on the theological level as a sign of interpenetration between Christianity and cultures in a fruitful encounter, gloriously attested to by the meeting of the Christian theology of the first centuries and the classical Greco-Roman heritage, and forcefully reaffirmed by the aforementioned *Evangelii Gaudium*.³

A significant corollary is that of interculturality, a dynamic category that presupposes a different approach than just “multiculturality.” The latter is a static reality of mere juxtaposition or coexistence, as happens in the various ethnic neighborhoods of many metropolises. Interculturality, on the other hand, is based on the recognition of diversity as a necessary and precious flowering of the common “Adamic” root, without, however, losing one’s own specificity. What is proposed, then, is attention, study, and dialogue with civilizations that were previously ignored or remote, but that are now prominently appearing in a cultural limelight that has been hitherto occupied by the West (consider Islam, but also India and China), an appearance that is facilitated not only by the current globalization, but also by means of communication capable of crossing every frontier (of which the computer network is the paramount symbol).

These cultures, which are “new” for the West, demand an interlocution, often imposed by their dominating presence, so much so that now there is a tendency to speak of “glocalization” as a new phenomenon of planetary interaction. We must, therefore, propose a complex commitment to encounter

¹ John Paul II, *Address to the 50th United Nations General Assembly* (United Nations Headquarters New York), para. 9 (5 October 1995). English version available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1995/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_05101995_address-to-uno.html.

² John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, para. 21 (2 June 1985). Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_19850602_slavorum-apostoli.html.

³ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 68–70 (24 November 2013). Available online at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

and dialogue, to cultural and spiritual exchange, which we could represent – in Christian theology – precisely through the same fundamental characteristic of Sacred Scripture and in particular of the Gospel.

2. Gospel and Culture

In order to develop our theme on a general theological level, it is necessary to refer to a central and structural thesis of biblical and, in particular, evangelical Revelation. The Word of God is not a sacred aerolite that swoops down from heaven, but rather the interweaving of divine *Logos* and historical *sarx*: “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14).⁴ This is a radical contrast with the Greek conception, which did not allow the eternal and transcendent *Logos* to be confounded by immersing itself in the temporality and materiality of history. In the Bible, on the other hand, we are in the presence of a dynamic exchange between Revelation and various civilizations, from nomadic to Phoenician-Canaanite, from Mesopotamian to Egyptian, from Hittite to Persian and Greco-Hellenistic, at least as far as the Old Testament is concerned; New Testament Revelation intersects with Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism, with Greco-Roman culture, and even with the pagan cults.

St. John Paul II, in 1979, affirmed before the Pontifical Biblical Commission that, even before becoming flesh in Jesus Christ, “the divine Word Itself had become human language, assuming the modes of expression of the various cultures which, from Abraham to the Seer of the Apocalypse, offered the adorable mystery of God’s saving love the possibility of becoming accessible and comprehensible to the various generations, despite the manifold diversity of their historical situations.”⁵ The same experience of fruitful exchange between Christianity and cultures – which gave rise to the inculturation of the Christian message in distant civilizations (one need only think of the work of Matteo Ricci in the Chinese world) – has also been constant throughout the Tradition beginning with the Fathers of the Church, both in their dialogue with classical culture and with the theme of *synkatabasis/condescensio* used to describe Revelation and the Incarnation.

In testimony to this cultural and spiritual encounter, it suffices to quote a passage from the First Apology of St. Justin (2nd century): “The entire human race were partakers of the divine *Logos*; and those who lived according to the *Logos* are Christians, even though they were thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and others like them”.⁶ As evocatively stated by the English Catholic writer Gilbert K. Chesterton: “All Christian iconography represents the saints with their eyes open to the

⁴ All Biblical quotations in this text are taken from the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE).

⁵ John Paul II, *Address to the Members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission* (26 April 1979). Available online at: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1979/april/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19790426_pont-com-biblica.html.

⁶ Justine Martyr, *First Apology*, XLVI, 2–3.

world, while Buddhist iconography represents every being with its eyes closed.”⁷ There are, therefore, two different typologies regarding our theme. On the one hand, there is a more exquisitely transcendental, absolute conception, which, by closing its eyes, seeks to go beyond the world, history, time, and space, with its fragility, its finitude, its limits, its weightiness. On the other hand, there is the Christian vision which is deeply innervated within various societies and in the multiplicity of cultures, so much so as to constitute an often unavoidable dialoguing presence.

With a little freedom, we could therefore reformulate the Johannine assertion as follows: “the Word became culture,” in the general anthropological sense indicated above. Indeed, Jesus Himself, precisely because He is true man as well as true God, is the *Logos* who became a Jew (John 4:22; 19:21), set within precise historical and geographical coordinates (a Galilean in the first thirty years of the first century under a regime of Roman imperial occupation), bound to the social status of “layman” (of the tribe of Judah and not of Levi: Hebrews 7:14; 8:4), professionally a carpenter (Mark 6:3) at first, and later an itinerant preacher. He is mentally structured according to Semitic cultural characteristics, as attested to by His language that privileges paratactic and parallelistic *logia*, parabolic symbols, and corporeality, unlike the Greek world that relied on syllogistic subordination, speculative abstraction, and interiority.

The very heart of His message, the “Kingdom of God” (Mark 1:15), is based on a theme typical of the Old Testament that drew on the socio-political components of the Near East and was configured as God’s dynamic plan of salvation within time (history) and space (creation). The same historical existence of Jesus intersected with the events of a society in whose fabric He was placed both in harmony (as attested to by the so-called “Third Quest” and the historiographic criterion of “continuity”) and as an explosive catalyst, with His not only theological but also cultural originality (as confirmed by the historiographic criterion of “dissimilarity” and “embarrassment”). A “marginal Jew,” yes, to use the well-known expression of John P. Meier,⁸ but also an unprecedented and explosive presence, as the final double sentence of His trial bears witness.

On the other hand, He had indeed wanted His message to be “inculturated,” starting precisely from His primary destination to Israel: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24); “Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:6). But He will then reach, with His Church, the entire *ecumene* in the Easter commissioning: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). And this is what St. Paul will do in an exemplary way, incarnating the Christian message in the Greco-Roman civilization with a complex and sophisticated operation of inculturation, even with all

⁷ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: John Lane Company, 1908), 74. The actual quote is: “The opposition exists at every point; but perhaps the shortest statement of it is that the Buddhist saint always has his eyes shut, while the Christian saint always has them very wide open.”

⁸ J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (vols. 1-3, New York: Doubleday- Random House, 1991–2001); (vols. 4-5, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009–2016).

the reactive difficulties that this work entailed (Acts of the Apostles 17:16-34). In this way, three striking metaphors used by Jesus, real coded compendia of inculturation, were actualized in history and culture: the salt in the food (Matthew 5:13), the yeast in the dough (Matthew 13:33), and the seed in the earth (John 12:24).

3. General Changes of the Cultural Paradigm

From the foundation we now move on to contemporary ramifications by casting a glance at some cultural paradigm shifts which are characteristic of our postmodern era. We shall do this through two movements, the first of which comprises a path of a general illustrative nature, while the second will be decidedly more circumscribed and entrusted to some particularly significant symbols. An initial survey concerns the erosion of cultural, moral, and spiritual identities, as well as the fragility of new ethical-social and political models, the changeability and acceleration of phenomena, and their almost gaseous fluidity (now codified in the well-known symbolism of “liquidity” proposed by the sociologist Zygmunt Baumann). These phenomena evidently also affect anthropology, particularly that of the youth. The theme is obviously complex and admits multiple analyses and results. We shall only indicate the phenomenon of the fragmented “ego,” linked to the primacy of emotions, to what is more immediate and gratifying, and to the linear accumulation of things rather than to a deepening of meanings. Indeed, society tries to satisfy all needs but extinguishes great desires and eludes projects with a broader scope, thus creating a state of frustration, and above all, distrust in the future. Personal life is full of consumption and yet remains empty, faded, and sometimes even spiritually extinct. Thus, narcissism flourishes, that is to say, self-referentiality that has various symbolic emblems such as the “selfie,” the headset, or even the standardized “pack,” the nightclub, or bodily exteriority. But there is also the antithetical drift of radical rejection expressed through protest as an end in itself or in generalized indifference, but also with the fall into drug addiction or suicide at a young age.

A new phenotype of society thus takes shape. In order to attempt a meaningful exemplification – referring for the rest to the endless sociological documentation elaborated in a continuous way – we propose a synthesis through a line from the philosopher Paul Ricoeur: “We live in an age when the bulimia of means corresponds to the atrophy of the ends.” Indeed, the primacy of the instrument over the meaning dominates, especially if it is ultimate and global. Let us think of the prevalence of technology (so-called “technocracy”) over science; or of the dominance of finance over the economy; of the increase in capital rather than productive and working investment; of the excess of specialization and the absence of synthesis in all fields of knowledge, including theology; of mere management of the State with respect to true political planning; of the virtual instrumentation of communication that replaces personal encounters; of the reduction of

relationships to mere sexuality that marginalizes and ultimately removes *eros* and love; of religious devotional excess that numbs rather than nourishes authentic faith; and so on.

Finally, let us just address the religious question with an evocation. “Secularity” is a typical value of Christianity on the basis of the evangelical axiom, “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s,” but also of the Incarnation itself, which does not erase the *sarx* for a spiritualistic *gnosis*. Precisely for this reason, any theocracy or hierocracy is not Christian, just as sacral fundamentalism is not, despite the recurring temptations to that effect. There is, however, also a “secularism” or “secularization,” a widely studied phenomenon⁹ that is clearly opposed to a coexistence with religion. And this happens through various paths: we shall highlight two of the more subtle ones (explicit persecution is, of course, more evident, but it is present in circumscribed areas). The first is the so-called “apatheism,” that is to say, religious apathy and moral indifference for which the fact that God exists or does not exist is altogether irrelevant, just as ethical categories are hazy, interchangeable, and subjective. This is what is well-described by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Priority is given to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional. What is real gives way to appearances. [...] [This has meant] the invasion of ways of thinking and acting proper to other cultures which are economically advanced but ethically debilitated”.¹⁰ The pontiff also introduces the second path, connecting it to the first one: “[It] tends to reduce the faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and personal. Furthermore, by completely rejecting the transcendent, it has produced a growing deterioration of ethics, a weakening of the sense of personal and collective sin, and a steady increase in relativism. These have led to a general sense of disorientation”.¹¹

In practice, there is an endorsement of the idea that religiosity is only an interior and personal spirituality, an experience to be relegated among the volutes of incense and the shining of candles in the sacred space of temples, separated from the pulsating square. These two aspects of the “new atheism” do not exclude, of course, the presence of a more conservative atheism still bound to critical and even sarcastic attack (à la Hitchens, Dawkins, Onfray, Odifreddi, and so on), or the figure of the so-called “nones,” who erase all religiosity, paradoxically relying, however, on pagan rituals...

These are just a few points of analysis regarding phenomena that become as many pastoral challenges and that expand to further important issues such as the concepts of “human nature” and “truth,” with the related issue of gender, or such problems as those raised by ecology and sustainability (see *Laudato*

⁹ See, for example, the imposing and famous study by C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, para. 64.

Si'),¹² to which young people are particularly sensitive, or the effect of a flattened economy on a finance that creates an enormous accumulation of capital, but also its “virtual” fragility, generating serious social crises and, in connection, the scourge of unemployment or poorly paid underemployment. In this regard, the message of the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* is explicit.¹³ We also think of more specific themes such as the link between aesthetics and culture, particularly the importance of new musical languages for young people and, more extensive in scope, the link between art and faith and so on.

It is important, however, to reiterate that attention to socio-cultural paradigm shifts must never be an act of mere denunciation, nor the temptation to retreat into sacred oases, nostalgically going back to an idealized past. The world in which we now live is full of turmoil and challenges to the faith, but it is also endowed with great human and spiritual resources of which young people are often the bearers: it is enough to mention lived solidarity, volunteerism, universalism, a yearning for freedom, victory over many diseases, the extraordinary progress of science, and testimonial authenticity required by many, even non-believers, from religions or politics, and so on. But this is another very important chapter to be written in parallel to the one drafted thus far and which lies outside the limited approach we have chosen.

4. Two Specific Itineraries: Science and Computer Communication

As we have announced, we shall now try to narrow down the vast and varied horizon evoked thus far, introducing two itineraries that we can consider fundamental in contemporary life, those of science and communication. These are the paths that the younger generations, in particular, are enthusiastically following, convinced that herein lie the most well-founded answers to so many of their expectations. Indeed, these are fascinating paths, even if still in their infancy, which are capable of creating real revolutions. Let us start with an incursion, however simplified, into the field of science with three examples. First of all, genetics, with the discovery of DNA and its flexibility and even its changeability, which has recorded different results: on the one hand, research has been developed with the aim of eliminating diseases; on the other hand, however, the use of genetic engineering has been hypothesized to improve and change the anthropological phenotype, envisaging a future with a radically modified human genome. It is in this further perspective that the still confusing landscape of trans- and post-humanism is opened.

This manipulation of DNA generates a delta of questions of various kinds, for now only futurological, starting from the basic question about the human species itself: will these new anthropological

¹² Francis, *Laudato Si'* (24 May 2015). Available online at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

¹³ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (3 October 2020). Available online at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

phenotypes still be classifiable in the genus *homo sapiens sapiens*? The questions become burning at the theological and ethical level: are these interventions in the heart of human life compatible, and therefore justifiable, with the biblical vision of man as deputy or viceroy or “image” of the Creator, or are they to be classified under the capital-original sin of wanting to be “like God,” in the act of Adamic hubris judged in chapter 3 of Genesis?

A second area where research is moving forward in a decisive way is that of neuroscience. For the Platonic-Christian tradition, mind/soul and brain belong to different planes, one metaphysical, the other biochemical. The Aristotelian-Christian conception, while recognizing the substantial autonomy of mind from brain matter, admits that the latter is an instrumental condition for the exercise of mental and spiritual activities. A more “physicalistic” model, widespread in the contemporary horizon, does not hesitate instead, also on the basis of evolutionary theory, to radically reduce mind and soul to a neuronal datum, which is, however, already impressive in itself: our brain, which weighs only 120-180 grams, contains a galaxy of a hundred billion neurons, as many as the stars of the Milky Way.

Faced with this complexity, we are content to underline that human identity also takes the stage here. This identity certainly has in the brain-mind (however the connection is understood) a fundamental meeting point whereby, if this reality is structurally influenced, one will go in the direction of redefining the human being. The sequence of philosophical, theological, and ethical problems stretches out then excessively: where to situate in such an approach the will, consciousness, freedom, responsibility, decision, calibration between external and intrinsic impulses, interpretation of acquired information and, above all, the origin of thought, of symbolism, of religion, of art, and, in the final analysis, the “ego”?

This perspective leads us, seamlessly, to a third equally impressive and delicate example, that of “thinking machines,” i.e. artificial intelligence. At present, so-called robotics is generating increasingly autonomous machines. There is no doubt that this has positive repercussions in the fields of medicine, production, management, and administration. But, precisely in this last sector, questions arise about the future of work, which is conceived in the classical and biblical vision as a component of hominization itself (the “cultivating and caring” and the “naming” of living and non-living beings), the lack of which therefore generates a social and personal imbalance. This imbalance is then intensified if a privileged class of inventors, programmers, and owners of similar machines appears.

The questions are perhaps more urgent on the anthropological side, since already today some machines have a remarkable ability to “appropriate” language, thus creating information autonomously. There is, then, an even more significant ethical side of things. What moral values can be programmed into the algorithms that lead the thinking machine to decision-making processes in the face of scenarios that are presented to it and in respect of which it must make a decision capable of affecting the lives of human creatures? The concerns regard in particular so-called “strong artificial intelligence” (artificial general

intelligence or Strong AI) whose systems are programmed for an autonomy of the machine up to the point of improving and recreating on its own the range of its services, so as to achieve a certain “self-awareness.”

Until now, the clear distinction between a machine with artificial intelligence and a human person has seemed stable, according to the assertion of the American philosopher of language John Searle (b. 1932) for whom computers possess syntax but not semantics; in practice they do not know what they are doing.¹⁴ But the prospects of the aforementioned “strong artificial intelligence,” which is convinced that it can cross this line of demarcation with the advent of machines that are not only thinking but also self-aware, shuffles the cards and requires new attention and examination, but also some demythologizing.

5. The Infosphere

The second itinerary that contemporary culture and society have embarked upon is so significant in its results that some believe it has already created a new anthropological phenotype. We refer to the question of mass communication. One of the best contemporary “digital” philosophers, Luciano Floridi of the University of Oxford, has acutely grasped this phenomenon in his book *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*.¹⁵ After the previous major turning points in history and modern science, namely, the three anthropological revolutions (the Copernican, Darwinian, and psychoanalytic), a computer revolution enters the scene, which manages to change the global coordinates of democracy itself, as well as of culture.

By now presupposed is the reference to the first steps taken by the Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) with his primordial considerations on the counterpoint between content and communication, with the axiom, which is now abused to the point of stereotype, according to which even “the medium is the message,” for which, as the Canadian scholar joked in one of the essays from *The Mechanical Bride*, “Today it is not the classroom nor the classics which are the repositories of models of eloquence, but the ad agencies.”¹⁶ But we have gone far beyond that. Indeed, the most significant sign of the change underway regarding the balance between content and communication is that now communication is no longer a medium similar to a prosthesis that increases the functionality of our senses, allowing us to see or hear farther away (tele-phone, tele-scope, tele-vision), but it has become a total, global, collective environment, an atmosphere that we cannot but breathe, not even those who delude themselves into thinking they can escape it, precisely, an “infosphere.”

¹⁴ Searle presented this point in the famous 1980 thought-experiment known as the “Chinese room argument” first discussed in “Minds, Brains and Programs,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 (1980): 417–57, and then in “Is the Brain's Mind a Computer Program?,” *Scientific American* 262, no. 1 (1990).

¹⁵ L. Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁶ M. McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1951).

Thus, today's communication is no longer an "extension of ourselves," as McLuhan intended, but the passing to a new "human condition," to an unprecedented anthropological model whose traits are controlled by this all-encompassing reality of which the Internet is the ruling banner.¹⁷ Even Galileo with the telescope only believed to "extend" visual capabilities, but in the end created a revolution not only cosmological but also epistemological and anthropological for which man was no longer the center of the universe (the "Copernican Revolution"). We are, therefore, immersed in a "creation" that is different from the primordial "creation."

In it there are already many new full-fledged citizens, those who, since 2001, with Mark Prensky, have been called digital natives,¹⁸ compared to those of previous generations who at most can aspire to be "digital migrants," unable – as happens precisely to immigrants – to lose the old accent. Immersed in this new general and global "environment," it remains increasingly difficult and senseless to adopt apocalyptic rejection. However, it is necessary to be sensitive and critically surveilled so as not to become "info-obese," i.e. totally integrated.

One should not, therefore, plunge into an impossible isolationism or into radical criticism. However, it is necessary to advance some reservations. At the purely linguistic level, a basic problematic phenomenon immediately emerges: similar to the citizens of the biblical Babel, we risk not understanding each other and becoming unable to dialogue, having become victims of a sick communication, excessive in quantity and quality, often wounded by violence, approximation and clinging to stereotypes, to excess and vulgarity, and even to falsification. We need, therefore, a campaign of linguistic ecology: authentic "communication," as indicated by the Latin root, is a making available to the other (*cum*) a *munus*, that is to say, a "gift," a "mission." It is, therefore, a sharing of values, of confidences, of contents, of emotions.

A further reservation to be pointed out concerns another computer phenomenon, which is at first sight positive, namely the exponential multiplication of data offered. Indeed, this can lead to an agnostic relativism, to an intellectual and moral anarchy, to a decrease in the capacity for critical selective examination. The hierarchies of values are upset, the constellations of truths are dispersed, reduced to a game of variable opinions in an immense basket of information. The principle that the philosopher Thomas Hobbes had formulated in his famous *Leviathan* (1651) is actualized in an unexpected way: "*Auctoritas non veritas facit legem.*" It is the powerful and dominant authority that determines ideas, thought, choices, behavior, and not the objective truth itself. The new authority is precisely the prevailing public opinion, which obtains more space and is more effective within the enormous mass of data offered by computer communication and which, in this way, creates "truths." Emblematic of the drift to which one can be led is

¹⁷ "The Extension of Man" was the subtitle of McLuhan's 1964 essay, "Understanding Media".

¹⁸ M. Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (October 2001).

the triumph of fake news, the lie that having taken root, being insisted on, and proliferated on the Internet, regenerates as pseudo-objective truth.

Another critical note points to the degeneration underlying a component that is in itself positive. Under the apparent “democratization” of communication, under the deregulation imposed by the globalization of information technology, which would seem to be a principle of pluralism, under the same multiplicity of content previously mentioned, a subtle operation of standardization and control is actually hidden. It is not for nothing that the management of networks is increasingly entrusted to the hands of tycoons or “mega-corporations” or centers of power that can skillfully and knowingly orient, shape, and mold for their own use (and for the use of their market and interests) content and data, thus creating new models of behavior and thought. Examples are the recent cases related to the instrumental socio-political use of Facebook data or to the external data breach in the electoral events of one nation.

A final critical observation concerns the acceleration and multiplication of contacts, but also their reduction to virtuality. As mentioned earlier, we are plunged into a “cold” and solitary communication that explodes into forms of exasperation and perversion. On the one hand, we have the sellout intimacy of the “chat line,” or Facebook, or to stay in the television sphere, that of so-called reality programs; we have the violation of subjective conscience, of interiority, of the personal sphere. On the other hand, the result is a more pronounced loneliness, a basic incomprehension, a series of misunderstandings, a fragility in one’s own identity, a loss of dignity. It has been observed that as soon as computers multiplied and satellite dishes flourished on the roofs of houses, people shut themselves in their homes and lowered their shutters. Paradoxically, the effect of moving towards virtual reality and media worlds has been one of separation from one another and the death of living, direct dialogue in the “village.”

Faced with such a problematic horizon, there can be a strong temptation to discouragement and an attitude of resignation, convinced of the unstoppable of a similar process destined to create a new human standard. The disembodied attitude of those who shut themselves up in their own little old world, content to follow the rules of the past, deploring the degeneration of the present age, is certainly not Christian. For young people, then, this is *par excellence* their world in which they were born and are at ease.

The French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin – while observing that the new means that have arisen to distinguish reality from manipulation and truth from lies, such as photography, cinema, and television, have been used in many cases precisely to foster illusion, manipulation, and lies – has demonstrated, along with many other scholars of these phenomena, how the new communication can ultimately generate a richer and more complex reality that is even more fruitful in human terms.¹⁹ This is what we often experience on the ecclesial level as well, in proclamation and pastoral engagement through the new “media.”

¹⁹ E. Morin, *L’esprit du temps* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2008).

It is, therefore, essential to continue to develop a theological and pastoral reflection on communication itself in the age of the Internet and on the ways in which the proclamation of the Gospel can be grafted onto it. At its basis, then, is the conviction that the Net is a “domain” endowed with great spiritual potential. It is necessary to continue research for the construction of a grammar of pastoral communications. This solicitation must involve not only the “technicians” of the digital civilization but also ecclesial workers in their continuous and constant encounter with the contemporary anthropological profile of the digital native and the new social society, and therefore, in a privileged way, with the world of young people.

We conclude our look at the need for the Church to pay attention to culture with a statement made by an exemplary witness who reminds us of the need to combine humanism and technology and, therefore, faith and contemporary culture, namely – Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple who, not long before his death in 2011, said: “Technology alone is not enough. It’s technology married with the liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields the results that makes our hearts sing.”²⁰

translated from Italian by Peter M. Falco

²⁰ At the iPad 2 unveiling, S. Jobs said: “It is an Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough – it’s technology married with the liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing.”