

Introductory Reflections

By Alexandros Katsiaras*

Your Excellency, Madame President of the Republic,
Your All-Holiness;

We live in a deeply materialistic age; yet the latter turns everything into immaterial images. A proof of this is the systematic promotion of disembodied communication. Digital technology creates a virtual environment where communication requires the body, not as a physical presence but as a tool. The body serves only to operate the machine through which the communication will take place. Its role ends there.

For example, the Internet, although attractive, is fundamentally antisocial in terms of physical presence. It facilitates instant communication; thus, it distorts reality by bypassing what is the most realistic of them all: the physical mediation of the material human body. Technological progress gives the impression that the body can transcend the boundaries of time and space; at the same time, it distances us from the reality that we are corporeal beings. We end up moving as little as possible. But the less we move, the more we forget that we are corporeal beings.

And we think we can do everything now as if we are omnipresent spirits. This is the root of narcissism and self-referentiality.

The denial of the body and, consequently of matter, is nothing new. Plato places the being of man exclusively in the intangible soul. When the Apostle Paul spoke to the Athenians about the resurrection of bodies their reaction was not accidental. This is mostly related to the fact that the body reminds us of a psychological and, especially, an existential reality: that we cannot control everything. This is something that man

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refuses to admit, because it confirms his limits. Our body is constantly transformed, in the absence of our will, through the inevitable changes of age, which begin with our birth. And death reminds us in the most absolute way that the body does not belong to us. The fear of decay, which led Faust to openly exchange his soul with eternal youth, is even more prevalent in postmodern societies. Therefore, through virtual reality, we try to live the fantasy of omnipotence, which the body de-constructs.

The body tells an inescapable story: that we cannot give birth to ourselves. We came from a common corporeality, that of the mother-infant. We are creatures of the decision and desire of the other. We are called to become autonomous, but we can never permanently erase the imprint of the other.

From whatever perspective we might approach the issue (theological, philosophical, political, psychological, etc.), we can realize that humanity is constantly struggling to accept the fact that we are corporeal beings and dependent on the presence of the other. The body and the other place constraints that ultimately crush any imaginary self-creation. But this is not dealt with by imaginary constructs, nor by introspection and self-improvement. How is it possible in such ways for man, mortal as he is, to come into terms with his mortality?

Theologically speaking, man, having been created in the image of God, bears the Other's indelible imprint. Adam's failure to handle this challenge – temptation was understood through his body. It was then that the fantasy of being equal to God was shattered.

These, among other things, contributed to the fact that the Conference theme was not reduced to the trivial discussion about the good and bad use of technology; its structure was based on a remark by the Greek philosopher Spyros Kyriazopoulos – that in our age, technique is not a quality of the craftsman, but an attitude of man towards the world, which defines his thinking and behavior.

In the context of the Conference, we will explore how this attitude to life affects not only politics, institutions, society, but also the Church and religions, i.e. everything as we knew it, but also whether it is true that technology creates more problems than it solves.

Nothing can be left unscathed, because the desacralization of the world is not limited to religions; it leads to the annulment of the symbolic meaning of even the secular institutions, introducing individual value as an absolute criterion.

According to Orthodox Theology, the body is the most important thing man has. It has been called the “temple of the Holy Spirit” («ναὸς τοῦ ἀγίου Πνεύματος»)¹. After its resurrection, we will always bring it with us. And it will bear witness to our relationship to our materiality and creatureliness, and ultimately our relationship to the imprint of the Other, the God, even after we’ve been resurrected.

With these scattered thoughts, Your All-Holiness, may I ask you to declare the opening of the Conference proceedings, and give your address.

1. *1 Cor.*, 6, 19.