# An Ecclesiastical Dystopia: the Possibility of a Digital Church without a Physical Presence

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## 1. The Christian Gospel

Christ evangelizes to people the harmonious communion of man with God and, by extension, with himself, his fellow man and nature. God-knowledge and self-knowledge, sociality and natural theory are the vital experiences of Christian life.

More specifically, man, being indiscernibly and indivisibly in communion with God, experiences two key features of true life: personal uniqueness and immortality. Man does not lose his identity in the divine-human communion; on the contrary, he is glorified as a unique and incomparable person. At the same time, in his communion with God, man overcomes decay and death; he becomes immortal by grace. The believer perceives himself as a gift from God, given to him to experience the sweetness of existence and the beauty of creation. To this end, he considers his fellow man as a brother and friend; communion is the founding act of life: Without the address of thou, the I fail to be established. Finally, nature is the great house of humanity, in which all creations of God are housed. Each being has its own special role to perform in the great cosmic function called life.

This evangelical proposal of life gives meaning to every aspect of it. Politics ceases to be an arbitration of the clash between self-centered

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individuals and is transformed into an art of unity of persons in solidarity. The economy ceases to be the management of conflicting interests and is transformed into the treatment of the specific needs of specific people. Work ceases to be slavery/work for survival and is transformed into creative work, offering to the public, *to all of us*. Love ceases to be a loveless wrestling of bodies and is transformed into a psychosomatic osmosis of loving persons. Art ceases to be a rearrangement of physical data and is transformed into a window to the last days, the coming and already inaugurated new world of God.

The Church is experiencing life in Christ with its entire existence. Especially in the Divine Liturgy, God is revealed as a Trinitarian communion and man as his beloved creation. God's fatherhood brings about the brotherhood of man. The participation of the faithful in the Bread of Life makes the Church a universal fraternal communion in which all are welcome. This universal reconciliation is promoted by the Church with her entire presence in the world. By bringing to the public the good tidings of great joy, the Church bears witness to the mercy of God and the dignity of man, the responsibility to the fellow man and the respect of nature[1].

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1. "The foundation for the value of the human person and the communion between them is the Triune God and the incarnation of the Son of God as the eternal man. These are the two, inextricably linked, great pillars of the Christian faith. They are two sources of love between men, i.e. of indivisible unity among them as humans and between them and God, for the purpose of endless and happy spiritual growth. They are the two sources of the harmonious life of mankind closely related to each other. The Triune God, His eternal and perfect existence, explains the incarnation of the Son of God as man, which connects us with Trinitarian love and secures for us joy and eternal spiritual progress. The world can only be a work of love and can have no other purpose than love which will never be satisfied. For love is the best way for persons to be utilized.

The promotion of the value of persons and of their mutual love as the only way to endless perfection, with the constant fight against selfishness and the passions that come from it, constitutes the Church's great and irreplaceable". D. Staniloae, *Θεολογία καὶ Ἐκκλησία*, Greek transl. N. Tsironis, Tinos Publications, Athens 1989, pp. 5-6.

## 2. Intangible and Physical Presence

The existential content of every theological life view is expressed in its worship. Consequently, the Christian faith is crucially reflected in its worship, especially in the Divine Liturgy. In it, the Church's fundamental concepts of God, man and nature are highlighted. Consequently, any alteration of the authentic worship rite implies corresponding theological, anthropological and cosmological differentiations.

Our time is characterized by the explosive progress of technology, which –among other things– offers new possibilities for communication between people. Thus, modern technology also enables the emergence of the digital church. It is the simulation of the rituals taking place in a temple, which someone can watch from home through his computer and by performing some movements with it. Similar churches have been operating for many years in the Protestant world. So, the question arises: Can the Orthodox Church adopt this practice? The answer emerges with the following rough tracing of the differences between attending Mass in a digital church and participating in the Liturgy of the Orthodox Church.

In a digital liturgy, man's relationship with God is reduced to individual pious contemplation. On the contrary, in the Orthodox Liturgy man communes with God face to face, foretasting his personal transformation within the renewal of the whole creation in its communion with God. Moreover, this psycho-physical communion of man with God is accomplished within a human community through a specific attitude towards nature[2].

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2. "The theological investigation begins with the visitation of the names. First of all, in the context of theological premises, the question of reality is an ontological and existential question par excellence. One of the theological discourse's fundamental principles is rooted in the answer (understood as belief in the revelation of God in the world) to the questions about who/what, in what manifestations and in what way he/she can be considered as real in the world. For the Christians, God is "Truly Existent", and the standing of this scales is the criterion of every manifestation of the real with reference to personal or social, physical or virtual life". Chr. N. Tsironis, Ἄνθρωπος καὶ κοινωνία, Vanias Publications, Thessaloniki 2013, p. 271.

In the digital liturgy, man is a spectator, a bystander to the events which are taking place in the temple, because he is physically absent. Of his senses, only sight and hearing are involved. Moreover, his physical absence precludes any contribution to the events and any interaction with others. On the contrary, in the Orthodox Liturgy, man is not a spectator but a active participant. This explains why in Orthodoxy, without the physical presence of even a lay person, the priest cannot celebrate the Divine Liturgy. Consequently, in the Orthodox Liturgy the whole psychosomatic dynamism of man participates and is fulfilled. His body participates in the hole event by crossing himself, sitting, standing, and moving. The believer also participates with all his senses: he sees the sequence of actions; he hears the dialogue; he smells incense; he tastes food; he kisses images. In this way, body and soul, senses and sensory organs, reason, emotion and will are moved together and cooperate in experiencing the truth[3]. The mutilation of the man's psychosomatic apparatus that is taking place in the digital liturgy contributes to the devaluation and degradation of various parts in relation to others. Idealistic notions of the inferiority of the body over the soul are consciously or unconsciously coming back to the fore. The Church, however, has struggled throughout its history to preserve the

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3. "The gradual but commendable removal of man, in the name of the most recent technological revolution, from what is essentially human, i.e. from the immediately personal and social character of his being, as the latter is expressed through the imposition of the stamp of his personal otherness on every field of his individual expression, i.e. from the imprint of his handwriting to the manifestation of his physiognomy, kinesthetic and generally behavioral expression in the arena of direct social relations, and its substitution by a framework of remote, distant, impersonal, largely uniform and repetitive digital encounters based on a fixed pattern of contactless, digital contacts not only does it not serve and lead to the aforesaid formation of the human person to the full or, at any rate, to the utilization of his or her actual potentialities, but it most certainly contributes to causing severe forms of social disability.

This is because the immediacy of the relations of communion tests and, consequently, exercises the individual virtues through the furnace and the friction of personal contact within the finite limits of the three-dimensional material space and the suffering -as well as the joy- of the palpable -and not merely traceable- human presence". V. Chr. Boutos, Ὁ ψηφιακὸς καπιταλισμὸς ὡς συντελεστὴς ἀπανθρωπίας, https://antifono.gr/ψηφιακοσ-καπιταλισμοσ/ [03.10.2023].

human person's integrity and functionality[4]. Thus, it has condemned any questioning of the incarnation of God, by rejecting any suspicion of the value and importance of, for example, the mind, the energy, the will of man.

Furthermore, man's absence from the digital church as physical entity also differentiates his relationship with his fellow man. There is practically no one beside him – only on his computer screen he can see that others are connected as simulacra on the same website. Yet in the Orthodox Liturgy the others are physically present, they are persons in the flesh, their bodies occupy a certain space and time[5]. This means that the believer learns to coexist with real people, whom he must know and love, regardless any biological or social distinction. In the Orthodox church, people of different biological traits –e.g. men and women, tall and short, colored and white– and of different social characteristics –e.g. origin, nationality, culture– coexist. The believer learns to accept all these,

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4. "The positive evaluation of physicality by Christians is not limited to the equal consideration of the psychic and the physical, in the "togetherness" (synamfoteron) of their existence. The body is the epistemological organ par excellence, the condition that makes possible the world and the things contained in it. The things of the world exist and are communicated to us in so far as they are presented to a corporeal subject. The world of our perception, the only world about which we can express ourselves, exists only in terms of and within the limits of our bodily existence. Whatever we know, we know it physically. There is no world objectified as pure externality. It exists only and exclusively through my body. And it exists in this particular way (the senses -vision, taste, tactility, hearing), because this is how my body can perceive it [...]. The body offers the dimension of existence, gives life, embodies in existence". Io. Plexidas, «Τὸ τέλος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου: μιὰ χριστιανικὴ προσέγγιση στὴν ἔννοια τοῦ μετανθρώπου», in: D. K. Yeroukalis (ed.), *Μετάνθρωπος*, Harmos Publications, Athens 2018, pp. 196-197.

5. "The third, even more complex level of study of the interpersonal relationship concerns the context within which the relationship exists. The context defines the rules, roles, codes and rituals that structure the relationship. It also defines the spatiotemporal elements within which the interaction is taking place, both in its physical and symbolic dimensions. In every human encounter, it is always important not only how the space is structured or where one sits, where one is placed or stands, but also what each person's particular 'position' symbolizes (where one chooses or where one is recommended to sit, what intervenes between us, what the postures of the bodies are, etc.). In online relationships, the importance of context is lifted. Each of the communicators is in front of his screen, in a physical space that the others neither define nor know". Betina Ntavou, «Γνωσιακὴ ψυχολογία: τεχνολογικὰ διαμεσολαβημένες σχέσεις», *ΑΩ/AO* 56 (2012), p. 49.

i.e. to understand all authentic otherness. Every genuine difference is not a cause of rupture and rivalry; it triggers mutual enrichment, difference in unity, unity in difference. Hence the believer learns, practically and empirically, to love his fellow man as he is and not as he would like him to be[6]. The believer loves specific people, not an abstract humanity. All narcissistic sameness is replaced by communion with the Other par excellence –God– and the others – the fellow human beings[7].

Now, in relation to nature, in the digital church, when the priest blesses and offers the bread, the person connected to him consumes at best a piece of bread in front of him. But in the Orthodox Mass, the faithful take from nature the wheat and grapes –gifts of God's love–, transform them into bread and wine, and bring them to the temple to offer them in return to God. God transforms them into the body and blood of Christ, and believers, by taking communion in them, become children of God and brothers and sisters to one another. By participating in the Eucharist, the believer testifies that when people are brothers and sisters the good things of the earth are not only sufficient for all but also abundant. Consequently, man is not a passive and unwilling being, simply adapting to the environment. As God's co-creator by grace, he adorns the creation with civilized touches: nature as a whole is sanctified and joins man to their quest towards God.

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6. "Here also the ecclesial quest lies to the rearticulation of the importance of interaction with the random neighbor and not with the one suggested by the online algorithms. What the Church will be in position to offer will be the gift of randomness, that is, the coexistence with the random other, with any other and not with the one who simply fits us". D. Skliris, «Ἄνθρωπος, ζῶο καὶ μηχανή», *Σύναξη/Synaxi* 147 (2018), p. 38.

7. "In contrast, in the privacy and selectivity offered by digital eucharist, those who participate in widely disparate physical places may never need to engage with each other in any particular or Christian way. In short, digital communicators can choose with whom they want to interact; in the real church, however, one cannot usually make that choice. In the digital environment, there seems to be a strong pull toward choosing homogeneity rather than choosing the constant divine invitation to graceful heterogeneity. Moreover, in digital communication one can serve oneself; in the real ecclesiastical communion one is served by others and serves others". G. S. Mikoski, "Bringing the body to the table", *Theology Today* 67 (2010), p. 258.

Furthermore, another difference between the digital church and the Orthodox one is that in the former the person connected to it does not have to move from his home. Instead of that, the Orthodox Christian, in order to participate in the Divine Liturgy, leaves his home and heads towards the common house of the faithful of his parish, to a particular church, at a particular place and time, by the assembled faithful of that particular parish. The Church is not mere aggregate of disembodied individuals, followers of an intangible ideology, but of related psychosomatic persons, who constitute and manifest the Church as a visible interpersonal community, which with its entire presence testifies to the God's new world. It is this new world that the gathering of the faithful in the temple represents; everything refers to it – the music, the architecture, the iconography, the rituals.

Thus, in the liturgical space-time of the Orthodox Divine Liturgy, the believers co-exist and synchronize themselves with God and their fellow human beings: the presence of others is a source of joy, a source of glory, a recognition of existence. In the dynamic march of human beings and nature towards God, all beings are united and harmoniously co-operating.

## 3. Different Theologies

The differences between a digital and an Orthodox Church are crucial. This is due to the fact that they express two different theologies, two different versions of the relationship between God, man and nature[8].

The man who is satisfied with the digital church is the individual of the postmodern age, who turns to God seeking the satisfaction of his so-called religious needs. Its characteristic feature is its liquidity: it is constantly changing to fit in with whatever it desires. Today it is associated with certain people, tomorrow with others; today it is associated with

8. "In the digital age, the classical controversy over the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist has perhaps been reversed. Now, the question with which we have to contend is not 'in what way is the Lord present in the Eucharist?', but 'in what way are we present in the Eucharist?' In these times of rapid transition to the digital age, it seems that presenting the body at the Lord's table is not so much about our bodies as it is about the Lord's body". G. S. Mikoski, "Bringing the body to the table", op.cit., pp. 258-259.

one digital church and tomorrow with another. The particular choice and disembodied connection allow him to remain alone, not to associate with tangible people, not to struggle in forming demanding social relationships, something which requires a corresponding ascetic stance. In a digital environment, he satisfies his need for private experiences of the sacred, without participating in a community committed to any effective action for the benefit of his fellow human beings. This is the model of the interchangeable human beings[9] promoted by today's dominant worldview; they are constantly changing face and identity –on the internet they can have as many faces and identities as they want– to fit in every time with whomever they think can satisfy their egotistic fantasies[10].

After all, this is the reason why their God is their narcissistic self. That is why it is no coincidence that they tend towards the new religious spiritualities. According to the latter, within their "inner self" there is a "divine spark"; when harnessed, it can connect with the positive universal energy, so that, far from external nuisances, he can experience individualistic bliss. It goes without saying, of course, that indifference to social problems and the "horror of history", the escapism into esoterism,

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9. "Indeed, the mentality and the way of life in mass democracy exhibit the same basic structural features that characterize the analytical-combinatorial form of thinking [...]. The liquidation, dissolution and fragmentation of the things that were previously stable and independent, though organically connected quantities in the context of the urban context, gave rise to infinite possibilities of combinations; their utilization became the self-evident way of thinking and living in mass democracy. Now everything can and is allowed to be combined with everything – in fashion, education, intellectual production or at the limits of personal life". P. Kondylis, *Ἡ παρακμὴ τοῦ ἀστικοῦ πολιτισμοῦ*, Themelio Publications, Athens 2000, p. 267.

10. "It is not difficult to realize that there is a significant difference regarding the mechanisms of the reception of the ecclesiastical discourse through the internet, compared to the traditional mechanism of things received through the 'mind and heart' during the divine worship. The online discourse is mainly received by the 'imaginary' of the psyche, according to Lacan, through the projection of symbolic means into the space of images-representations of the psyche and imagination, as well as other secondary psychic attitudes. All of these maintain the imaginary approach to reality. The result is that, through the frequent projection, the individuals cultivate a false yet narcissistic need to be on the internet for reasons that do not stem from the needs of God's people, but often from their own needs". V. Io. Kalliakmanis – Chr.-Gr. Tymbas, «Ὀρθόδοξη λατρεία καὶ κατήχηση στὰ ψηφιακὰ μέσα», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 90, 3 (2019), pp. 83-84.

is the best ally for the owners and holders of the wealth and power of this world[11].

On the contrary, the man who participates in the Orthodox Church is fully aware of the existential implications of his faith. Here, God is the consubstantial communion of three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The you, the I, the other, coexist harmoniously in us: one with the other, through the other, for the other. Uniqueness, unity and equality are the predominant characteristics of person-centered societies. Uniqueness: each person is unique and unrepeatable, therefore irreplaceable. Unity: each person is fully offer itself to the others, thus there is a common life. Equality: no domination, therefore full respect for the other. This way of life –the freedom that loves and the love that liberates– is revealed to people by Christ and experienced by the believer in the Church.

Consequently, the Christian is not indifferent to his fellow man and society. Having a universal conscience, he strives to rid the world of individualism and closedness, collectivism and exclusion, estrangement and alienation. Much more than that, he or she struggles to project what is the essence of life: faith, hope, love.

## 4. Changing the Objectives

Technology is not neutral; it always expresses a certain worldview. Hence, modern technology expresses what Spyridon Kyriazopoulos has called "Technical Spirit"[12]. It is an ideological aspect of Modernism,

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11. "Studying these strategies carefully, however, it is easy for someone to see that the vast majority of them work *to the detriment of the well-being of the social body and are consistent with its impoverishment*. To put it differently, we could say that these strategies do not only constitute defensive 'survival' mechanisms, as they claim; they also function as *strategies for consolidating social austerity*. With the difference that austerity is now being dubbed a 'spiritual' and 'simple' way of life, which allows people to '*feel fine and be happy with minimal preconditions*'". D. Oulis, «Τὸ New Age συναντᾶ τὴν πολιτική», *Σύναξη/Synaxi* 147 (2018), p. 87.

12. "Technology is therefore not simply a set of mechanical objects; it's the way in which modern problems are created as well as the method of their solution and, from this point of view, the precondition of human essence. For this reason, the discourse

which appears as a new deity and promotes a new utopia. Through it, the present evolutionary stage of man will be succeeded by the posthuman stage: the replacement of man's parts, the enhancement of his capabilities and the addition of new ones will create the cyber-organism, a hybrid of man and machine. This will be done until the limitations of the present human nature are reduced to zero, for the ultimate goal to be achieved: immortality[13]. Furthermore, the pharmaceutical definition of morality will lead to perpetual individualistic bliss. Once again, technology aspires to solve not only the biological but also the existential problems of man[14]: the Babel's syndrome is coming to the fore.

Facing this utopia, a product of the Enlightenment's naive over-idealism, which results in the dystopia of an unfree being in a technocratic society, the Church of Christ must demonstrate another existential objective. In it, technology will affirm human and secular nature, it will contribute to the coexistence of man and nature, nature and culture, culture and politics, politics and art; by escaping from any fixation on the immanent, will be constantly renewed in their communion with the transcendent – something that will transcend all authoritative dualisms: God and man, man and fellow man, man and nature, body and soul, virtual and real, local and universal.

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related to technique does not refer to things, but to man. It is not a discourse regarding the technical work, but the technical spirit". Sp. D. Kyriazopoulos, Ἡ καταγωγὴ τοῦ τεχνικοῦ πνεύματος, Athens 1965, p. 15.

13. "Still, the quest for immortality in transhumanism is not only a natural consequence of man's pursuit of self-improvement; it is equally necessary, since the upgrades under the shadow of death cannot be exploited to their fullest extent. Only after the attainment of immortality will man have the necessary time not only for their full utilization, but also for the solution of all his problems and the fulfillment of his dreams". Th. Tasis, «Ὑποσχέσεις ἀθανασίας: μία συγκριτικὴ προσέγγιση ὁρισμένων ὄψεων τοῦ ὑπερανθρωπισμοῦ καὶ τοῦ τεχνικοῦ μετανθρωπισμοῦ», Θεολογία/Theologia 92, 1 (2021), p. 98.

14. "Technical achievements ensure certain divine qualities (omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, omnipresence), providing modern man with a sense of transcendence and redemption from the bonds of nature. Technoscience is the modern analogue of Divine Grace; its applications often take on spiritual dimensions, offering post-religious man a sense of mystical experience". Dim. Io. Bekridakis, «*Homo ex machina*: ἡ θεολογία, ἡ ἐπιστήμη καὶ τὸ πρόβλημα τῆς τεχνικῆς», Θεολογία/Theologia 91, 1 (2020), p. 103.

Thus, the difference between *online religion* and *religion online* is clear[15]. In the first case, we have the simulation of a church, with which one is connected online, with all that this implies. We are dealing here with self-referential individuals seeking self-referential experiences in self-referential idols.

In the second case, a Church uses the internet in a way that invites the whole person to actively participate in its whole life. For example, a photograph of one's children is only meaningful when it reminds us that life is actually touching them, talking and playing with them, experiencing parenthood and childhood through tangible, real persons. Hence, everything points to the experience of bonds that shape the humans – the participation in a web of relationships that constitute the ecclesiastical way of life. Everything refers to the original, to loving interpersonal relationships, which are carried out –among other things– by looking, hearing, touching, and smiling[16]. In a person-centered society, persons are jointly consulting, feeling, desiring; in their mutual interpenetration, they give and reciprocate whatever is real, experiencing the homoousion.

## 5. Living Testimony

The Church is called on to face the challenges of the modern age[17] by presenting the man-loving God and the God-loving man, the fellow

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15. See Chr. Helland, "Online religion as lived religion. Methodological issues in the study of religious participation on the internet," *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1, 1 (2005), pp. 1-16.

16. "In any case, online transmission must at the same time be seen not as something complete, but as a reminiscence. It is neither a substitute for the physical meeting nor its equivalent. It's a reminder that they are pending. To have the photo of my beloved next to me is precious when I am having a hard time in my loneliness, but the photo is not my beloved. The reunion is pending, and the big damage will be done if I stop feeling it's pending". Th. N. Papathanasiou, Ἡ Ἐκκλησία στὴ νέα ψηφιακὴ ἐποχή, https://dimoskaipoliteia.gr/2020/12/08/h-ekklisis-sti-nea-psifiaki-epoxi/ [3.10.2023].

17. "The Church is called upon to listen, to understand, to debate and to define these issues. It should not approach these in a belligerent or apologetic manner; it has to responsibly and critically update its identity as a proposal of life, so as to preserve its being, i.e. the being of man in Christ". Al. Katsiaras, «Ἡ ὀρθόδοξη ἀνθρωπολογία ἐνώπιον μιᾶς νέας "κανονικότητας" ("new normal") ἢ μιᾶς νέας "θρησκευτικότητας"», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 92, 1 (2021), p. 305.

human being and the world as an ornament. Without forgetting, on the one hand, that a perfect society will not be achieved in history –for it is a gift of God to be given at the end of time–, it must, on the other hand, present it here and now, always and everywhere. Beyond the Skylla and Charybdis of utopia and dystopia, the Church should remind us all that only communion with the Uncreated God can offer the created man the fullness of life and immortality. Consequently, the Church is called upon to be what it should be: a place of resurrection and a way of revolution.

If it does not act likewise, then it is reduced to another secular institution, where a meaningless quarrel prevails between petty enemies and petty friends.