

# The New Technologies and Christian Coherence

"Christians see these new possibilities in the context of the positive exercise of personal freedom, as a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness." An article on Christian life

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Technology is becoming ever more present in people's daily lives. Easy access to mobile phones and

computers, together with the Internet's global and capillary presence, has made it possible to send words and images within seconds to faraway places.

This new culture of communication has given rise to many benefits. Families can keep in contact across great distances; students and researchers have quicker and easier access to documents, sources and scientific discoveries; moreover, the interactive nature of many of the new means facilitates more dynamic forms of learning and communication, thereby contributing to social progress.[1]

We can even say that, besides the physical environment where our lives unfold, there now also exists a “digital environment” that cannot simply be seen as “a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of

the daily experience of many people, especially the young.”[2]

## **Unity of life in the “digital world”**

The new technologies offer great possibilities. They widen our knowledge in many areas, including news, work methods, business opportunities, and open up many options for those who have to make a decision on a specific matter. They enable information to be processed and updated quickly and spread all over the world, making it available anywhere, even in the smartphone we hold in the palm of our hand.

Christians see these new possibilities in the context of the positive exercise of personal freedom, as “a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness.”[3] This virtuous exercise leads to acting in accord with what each one is, with the authenticity of the person who has “just one life, made of flesh and spirit. And it is this

life that has to become, in both body and soul, holy and filled with God.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The call to holiness gives meaning to and unifies all the deeds of a Christian. As Saint Josemaria said: “We Christians cannot resign ourselves to leading a double life – our life must be a strong and simple unity into which all our actions converge.”<sup>[5]</sup> We do not have one way of acting in “the virtual world” and another in “the real world.” Unity of life leads us to enter and take part in the digital world in a way that is coherent with our personal situation, employing all the possibilities available to us to fulfill our daily family, work and social duties better.

That is why each of us needs to enter the digital world with our own identity, a Christian identity.<sup>[6]</sup> On the other hand, since the new

technologies allow a person to act with some anonymity, and even create a false identity, the risk exists of making them a “refuge” that distracts us from the unavoidable reality we have to face. “Stop dreaming. Leave behind false idealisms, fantasies, and what I usually call mystical wishful thinking; if only I hadn’t married, if only I were healthier, if only I were young, if only I were old... Instead turn seriously to the most material and immediate reality, which is where our Lord is.”[7]

Today the digital world is like an “extension” of our daily life, and it is only natural that it also be a place where we seek holiness and apostolate, since we also influence others when we are on the web. This is especially important for those who, because of their job or position, have a strong influence on others: parents, teachers, managers, etc.

To behave as authentic Christians means to act “in such a way that those who know them sense ‘the good aroma of Christ,’”<sup>[8]</sup> and can “recognize the Master’s face in his disciples,” also in the digital world. [9]

### **Practicing the virtues and being “souls of criteria”**

Obviously, the use of the new technologies depends on each person’s situation, on one’s age, profession, social environment, possibilities and knowledge. Not everyone is meant to use them, and those who don’t shouldn’t be looked down upon because of that. We could compare computer skills to driving a car: not everyone needs to know how to drive, but it is very useful that some have this skill.

In a similar way, specific skills that are required and suitable ways of behaving when “traveling” in the

digital world have gradually been formulated. In fact, in some places legislation on the use of information technology is being drawn up because of its repercussion on the common good. This new technology contributes to the integral good of the person when it facilitates the practice of the Christian virtues and respect for the moral law. Thus technical progress and an ethical life should go hand in hand, so that each person is strengthened in their “inner being,”[10] and learns to use these means with freedom and responsibility.

In order to manage prudently the new technologies, besides having a minimum of technical knowledge, one needs to discern their possibilities and risks. This means keeping in mind, for example, that anything done on the Internet (writing an email, making a telephone call, sending a text

message, uploading a video, etc.) is never completely private; other people can read, copy or change the content, and we may never know who did it or when.

Moreover, the user of this new technology needs to foster a reflective attitude in order to make effective use of the many possibilities offered. Often the ethical command “if you should, you can” is transformed by commercial interests into its opposite: “if you can, you should.” Prudence helps us to rise above the sense of urgency with which commercial offers are sometimes presented, and to take the time needed to ensure that our decisions in the “virtual world” correspond to our real needs. In the end, it is a question of striving to grow in *being* and not only in *having*, because Christ’s warning also applies to these new resources: *For what does it profit a man if he gains the*

*whole world and loses or forfeits himself?*[11]

In a certain sense, the new technologies offer us “worlds” of information, news, contacts, and thus each person needs to reflect on how to make best use of these resources given their specific circumstances, in a way that is positive and without losing self-mastery over their actions. In any case, we need to reject “the idea that technology is self-sufficient, when too much attention is given to the ‘*how*’ questions, and not enough to the many ‘*why*’ questions underlying human activity.”[12]

However, it is not simply a matter of following a “list of rules” or “criteria,” since these could quickly become obsolete given the continuous change in this area. Such rules are useful, but the ideal is that using the new technologies should

help foster the integral growth of the person.

Therefore it is more important – and more attractive – to center our efforts on acquiring good habits, the virtues. A person who has acquired a virtuous “style” when using electronic devices and the Internet, will be able to adapt easily to any changes, and discern the advantages and risks of new developments in this area under the light of the Christian vocation. Using some words of Saint Josemaria, we could also say that the ideal here is to become “souls of criteria.”[13]

## **A new field for formation**

Normally, one doesn’t learn how to drive on one’s own. We need to spend time with a relative or an instructor who gives us advice and points out the dangers on the road. Something similar happens with the use of the new technologies. We

realize how important it is to be accompanied by someone, especially if the person starting to use them is young. For that person to attain the independence needed, like the driver who will soon have to drive alone, requires a solid work of education. “We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data – all treated as being of equal importance – and which leads to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment. In response, we need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values.”[14]

Therefore centers of education will need to pay more attention to training students in the virtuous use of information technology. This task is not limited to providing “technological literacy” or knowledge of the latest developments, but will

also help the students acquire the moral habits needed to use these devices with sound criteria, with good use of time.

Formation doesn't end when one's youth is left behind. At all stages in life it is natural to lean on the advice of people with more experience, family members and friends. After all, we are talking about an "extension of daily life" that we share with others. For example, many people find in personal spiritual direction a good opportunity to study together the best times to use the Internet or social media, how to confront a particular problem or misunderstanding that may have cropped up when using them, or apostolic initiatives that this area offers.

In the next articles we will go deeper into the virtuous use of the new

technologies. We will cover habits and attitudes that are of particular importance, due to the nature of these instruments, such as temperance, study, recollection. Moreover, since many personal interactions nowadays take place in the digital world, we will also pay attention to virtues more closely related to our social nature, which enable us to make a reality of Saint Peter's advice to Christians: *always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you.* [15]

*Interior Quiet in the Digital Age*

*Educating in the New Technologies*

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[1] Cf. Benedict XVI, *Message for the*

*XLIII World Social Communications Day*, “New technologies, new relations,” 24 May 2009.

[2] Benedict XVI, *Message for the XLVII World Social Communications Day*, “Social Networks: portals of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelization,” 24 January 2013.

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1731.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 114.

[5] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 126.

[6] Cf. Francis, *Discourse to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications*, 21 September 2013, no. 2.

[7] *Conversations*, no. 116.

[8] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 105.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Cf. *Eph* 3:16.

[11] *Lk* 9:25.

[12] Benedict XVI, Enc. *Caritas in veritate*, 29 June 2009, no. 70.

[13] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, “To the reader.”

[14] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 64.

[15] *1 Pet* 3:15.