Monastic Martyria or Witness in the Internet Age

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"I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil one." – John 17:15

The advent of the Internet, along with mobile devices that ensure our 24/7 connection with it, has changed us and continues to change us. And by "us" I mean not only all of humanity in general, but more specifically the smaller "us" that are church communities. While "we," as the broader globalized society of today, are beginning to comprehend *What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*—as Nicholas Carr entitled his excellent book on this question—it is also necessary that "we," as both lay and monastic members of today's churches, contemplate how we are being changed or re-formed through the Internet and social media.[1] Are new online means of community building, communication, and, dare I say, *communion* reshaping our church structures and vocations? As the media scholar and Jesuit priest John Culkin observed back in 1967, "We shape our tools, and thereafter they shape us."[2] If that is so, is it a bad thing?

A definitive response to these questions is not possible at this point, because we are still living through this undeniable revolution in human thinking and human being generated by the Internet and related phenomena. But what follows are some observations on Orthodox monastic and monastic-like vocations and ministries today. And in using the term "monastic-like," I mean

that the Internet-based ministries that will be described in this article are by no means only for monastics, just as there is no essential difference between the vocations of monastics and laypeople. As Georges Florovsky noted in his well-known article "Empire and Desert," the great monastic movement of the fourth century was, after all, a *lay* movement, not one initiated by any church ordinance. The later polarization between monastics and laypeople, and even worse, the classification, in church consciousness, of faithful laypeople and monastics as "the good" and "the better" was, to Florovsky's mind, a tragic distortion.[3] Nevertheless, as the ministries described below are commonly associated with monastic saints of the past, I will be exploring how monastic-like vocations are being both challenged and fostered in traditional ways within the untraditional wilderness or frontier that is the Internet.

Inhabiting the Desert

The first—traditionally monastic—challenge with which the Internet presents the Church is what I would call inhabiting the wilderness or desert, if one sees the Internet as the proverbial desert or ἔρημος. Note that in ancient Greek literature, this term (whether used in the sense of the noun, *desert*, or the adjec-

[1] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 210.

[2] John M. Culkin, "A Schoolman's Guide to Marshall McLuhan," *Saturday Review*, March 18, 1967: 51–3, 70–2.

[3] Georges Florovsky, "Empire and Desert: Antinomies of Christian History," *Cross Currents* 9.3 (Summer 1959): 252–3.

tive, *deserted*) did not have to mean a literal desert but referred to abandonment, as in the case of a person who had been abandoned or a locality that was empty, lonely, or without inhabitants—*human* inhabitants, that is. In the New Testament, it is the place where the Good Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep on their own, "ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ," to go look for the lost one (Luke 15:4). As a place abandoned (by God or God's servants), the desert or ἔρημος is a place with many dangers to body and soul (2 Cor. 11:26, Heb. 11:38, Luke 10:30); it is a place where demons abound and only the demoniac wanders (Luke 8:29).[4] Today the Internet is described even by secular observers in almost these terms, as empty of, or abandoned by, its initial or potential good—for example, by *Financial Times* business columnist Rana Foroohar in her recent book, *Don't Be Evil: How Big Tech Betrayed Its Founding Principles—And All of Us*.[5]

Nonetheless, in biblical terms, an ἔρημος can also be a place that holds the promise of divine grace (Isa. 32:15ff), specifically because it is so desolate, chaotic, and, so to say, in need of work. Where sin abounds, according to Saint Paul, there grace abounds much more (Rom. 5:20). For this reason, the desert or wilderness attracts members of God's "special forces," the hermits, as it holds fewer visible distractions from the invisible enemies that need to be dealt with, inside ourselves and in this world. The solitary desert-dweller painstakingly and gradually brings order into the chaos of the desert, within himself and also in his physical environment. He effects this ordering with and through the word of God, through *truth-telling*, as he becomes "a voice of one crying out in the wilderness" (Isa. 40:3, LXX). And as God's voice in that wilderness or in the chaos, the solitary desert-dweller brings order. Or in hylomorphic terms, he

sacramentally lends form to what was previously unsanctified matter, in synergy with God's eternal, life-creating Logos. Just as we see John the Baptist immerse Christ into the waters of the Jordan, depicted on icons of the Baptism of the Lord as infested with serpents, and Christ is said in the Byzantine hymnography of that feast to have "destroyed the heads of the serpents [or dragons] nesting therein,"[6] thus are the earliest desert-dwellers, beginning with Saint Anthony in the *Vita Antonii*, described as making a previously dangerous locality livable through Christ.[7] The main troparion (or apolytikion) to Saint Anthony, celebrated on January 17, hails him as a "colonizer of the desert": "Πάτερ Ἀντώνιε, τῆς ἐρήμου γέγονας οἰκιστής."[8] Note that thus the "human footprint" was a good thing, as distinct from how it is often perceived today, because Anthony and his monks "colonized" the wilderness with divinized humanity, where previously there was a wasteland, and with the Truth, the Word of God, where previously it had not been voiced.

Today's Internet is a chaos similar to the various deserts that needed to be "inhabited" and "ordered" in the ancient world, first and formost because the 24/7 Internet *lacks any specific time or space*. Hence the abundance of information that is always available online lacks what I would call a *hierarchy of meaning*. It is undifferentiated information, coming from anywhere and at anytime. So the ancient Christian—and particularly "monastic"—discipline of sanctifying, with specific anamnetic meanings, every hour of every day, as well as sanctifying specific spaces, for and by prayer, is a way of life that is very much countercultural in the Internet Age. If it is to survive, it must forcefully, ascetically rein in the chaos of 24/7 connectivity, which is no small challenge.

[4] *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 657–9.

[5] Rana Foroohar, *Don't Be Evil: How Big Tech Betrayed Its Founding Principles—And All of Us* (New York: Currency, 2019).

[6] "…καὶ τὰς κεφαλὰς τῶν ἐκεῖσε ἐμφωλευόντων συνέτριψας δρακόντων." Menaion of January (Athens: Apostoliki Diakonia tis Ekklisias tis Ellados, 2009), 172.

[7] "Thus in the mountains there finally appeared monasteries; the wilderness became inhabited by monks [καὶ ἡ ἔρημος ἐπολίσθη ὑπὸ μοναχῶν]." Athanasius the Great, *Vita S. Antonii*, in *Patrologia Graeca* 26, col. 644B.

[8] *Ὡρολόγιον το Μέγα* (Athens: Φως, 1995), 259.

The Baptism of
Christ. Icon from
Slimnica Monastery,
North Macedonia,
c. 1612.

But the Internet's chaotic flow of information is challenging not only because it is 24/7 and from everywhere, but also because, in our "post-truth" world, it is sometimes only half-true or even patently false. The distortions of identity-driven politics and their news sources, the half-truths of political correctness, both on the political right and the political left, and all this in both secular and church media, make *truth telling* a vital but dangerous vocation. Our online "desert" is often crawling with little and big lies—not just the ones we might tell about our individual selves in social media posts, but also those we might perpetuate collectively, as a society, as a nation, or even as a Church. We lie; we pretend everything is all right, even in times of crisis (as in

our modern-day crisis of pan-Orthodox conciliarity), failing to make the necessary repairs to keep our personal or collective "machinery running," even as we "speed the deterioration of great things through blindness, inaction, and deceit."[9]

To expose or correct lies necessitates sacrifice, just as the Word of God, Jesus Christ, sacrificed himself to restore or re-clothe humanity in Truth. And this brings us to the next traditional element of our untraditional, Internet-based vocations: *martyrdom* or *witness*.

Martyria

Martyria or *martyrion* (martyrdom, witness, proof), with which the ascetical life was associated in patristic writings, is a calling nonetheless shared by all Christians, as Christ says to all his followers: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses (ἔσεσθέ μου μάρτυρες) in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).[10]

The word "martyr" (μάρτυς) derives from the Indo-Germanic root smer, meaning both "to remember" and "to be careful."[11] Related words include the Greek μεριμνάω, "to be anxiously concerned"; the Latin memoro, "to remember" (with pain); the Greek μεϱμηϱίζω, "to consider, deliberate, hesitate," and the German *Schmerz*, "pain." Thus, a martyr is one who knows something because he or she has "(co-)seen" it (as in the Slavic "с-видетель"). And this knowledge weighs heavily on her, because to admit to it or profess it, particularly before those who have not seen it or are not disposed to believe the testimony, can be incriminating to her.[12]

How is all this etymology related to being a Christian witness on the Inter-

net? When speaking or posting today on our politically correct social media, a truth-embracing Christian will be painfully aware of—and "anxiously concerned" about—walking a tightrope. One false move and you just might lose your Facebook "friends," your academic position, your church appointments, or—in the case of a celebrity—your TV show, your film or stand-up career, and so on. "False moves," by the way, include not expressing sufficient indignation about someone else's "false move"; or using the wrong pronoun for a transgender person; or having done so in a tweet eleven years ago; or calling non-Orthodox churches "churches"; or even touching on issues like female ordination or same-sex marriage; or being photographed with someone who has touched on these issues; or going to an academic conference that discusses them. While walking this tightrope, the Christian witness would be well-advised to consider, deliberate, and hesitate, as befits a *martyr* according to the etymology of the word. But above all, one must have a safety net for one's almost inevitable fall(s). What is that safety net? A sacramental life in Christ, and the honesty that goes hand in hand with it. But let's get to the semiology of the word "martyr," to explain that point.

The semiology of "martyr," a bit different from its etymology, is based on the stories of the holy martyrs in the strictest sense, those who died for being Christians, or more specifically, for telling the truth about *who they were*. It was enough to profess "*Christianus sum*" to be sentenced to death already under Trajan (98–117), when Christians were judged for *nomen ipsum*.[13] (Today, if you identify yourself as a Christian, in most parts of the world they won't kill you; they'll just assume you're a Protestant. So we Orthodox avoid the term "Christian," and generally self-identify as "Orthodox.")

[9] Jordan Peterson, 12 *Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018), 228.

[10] G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 830.

[11] *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, ed. Julius Pokorny, vol. 1 (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1959), 969. See also *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, 474–7.

[12] See V. V. Bolotov, *Лекции по истории древней церкви*, vol. 2, (St. Petersburg, 1907), 2–8.

[13] Ibid., 75.

The power of Christian martyrdom, in the strictest sense of truth-telling about who you are, as did the holy martyrs, could be vital to being effective on the Internet, despite the above-described pressures and challenges of political correctness. Because the Internet Age, somewhat ironically in light of all of the above, does value authenticity. Note the popularity of a Joe Rogan (the most viewed podcaster on YouTube in 2019, who is "just a guy" who has unfiltered, long conversations with his guests); a Ben Shapiro (a conservative, Orthodox Jewish political commentator); a Bill Burr; or even a Donald Trump or an Alex Jones, all of them quite "unfiltered." The phenomenon of the very effective Roman Catholic online missionary, Bishop Robert Barron—although his number of followers cannot be compared to the former personalities—can also be attributed to the very frank, direct way in which he shares of himself with his viewers. While it is obvious that a faithful, ascetical Christian could never be as "unfiltered" as those who are . . . not, the lesson one could glean for Christian *martyria* online from the "witness" of effective non-Christian and non-ascetical personalities is that one must truly be one's self.

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Much more could be said about the traditionally monastic or "monastic-like" charisms and ministries that are called for today, in the new wilderness or frontier that is the Internet. For example, the religious instruction of the faithful (that is, the internal mission of the Church), and the missionizing of outsiders (the external mission).[14] But regardless of the specific ministry that a monastic or "monastic-like" Christian performs on the Internet, the most fundamental questions that arise, for a traditional or traditioned vocation of the Church such as monasticism, are:

1. Does the new proximity of Internet-engaged monastics to "the world" blur the traditioned boundaries between laypeople and monastics, and redefine the latter as laity (мирские)?

2. Is this a good thing?

On the basis of ancient church tradition, I would cautiously say this is a good thing, as a recovery of a pristine, Christian *koinonia*, in the spirit of common "witness" before the yet-to-be-humanized "wilderness" of our modern-day world. But it is doubtless a *change*, for us as individuals and as Church. And, as a change or transition, it is a learning process and often a painful one. As they say, "every bit of learning is a little death."[15] But that's fine, because, according to tradition, it is what a Christian is called to do every day: "As it is written," Saint Paul reminds us, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered" (Rom. 8:36). ❋

[14] "Mönchtum," in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 5 (Tübingen, 2002), 1412–3.

[15] Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, 223.

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