ANTONIO SPADARO

CYBERTHEOLOGY

Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet

TRANSLATED BY MARIA WAY

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OF THE INTERNET

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Preface

Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think? This is the title of a 2011 collection of interviews, edited by John Brockman, on the impact of the Internet on our lives. Is the Internet changing our way of thinking? The recent digital technologies are no longer tools or devices that exist totally apart from our bodies and minds. The Internet is not an instrument; it is an *ambience* which surrounds us. The handheld devices that permit us to be connected at all times are becoming ever lighter and smaller, making life's digital dimensions almost transparent. They are open doors that are rarely closed. Who turns off an iPhone anymore? One charges it and puts it on vibrate, but one rarely turns it off. There are some who do not even know how to turn one off. If one carries a smartphone in one's pocket, then one is always connected to the Internet.

Not surprisingly, a growing number of studies looks at the ways in which the Internet is changing our everyday lives and, more generally, our relationships with the world and with the people who are close to us. However, if the Internet is changing our ways of living and thinking, does it not also change (and

thus is already changing) our way of thinking about and living the faith?

I've been asking myself this question since January 2010, when I received an invitation to give a talk at a conference entitled "Digital Witnesses." The invitation came from Monsignor Domenico Pompili, the director of the Office for Social Communications at the Italian Bishops' Conference. The director had asked me to talk about faith and the Internet. Since 1999, I have written many articles on individual aspects of the Internet and on single networks in _La Civiltà Cattolica_. My talk in some ways was an extension of my work for the journal and its strong propositions. I became its director in October 2011. The journal's interests in communication started with Father Enrico Baragli, a real pioneer in studies of the mass media, who was followed by Father Antonio Stefanizzi, who wrote articles on new communication technologies. When I received Monsignor Pompili's invitation, I had already published _Nuove forme della cultura al tempo di internet_ (_New Forms of Culture in the Era of the Internet_) (2006), and _Reti di relazione_ (_Nets of Relationships_) (2010). However, that invitation put me at a disadvantage. I understood that they were not asking for an exploration of a phenomenology of the instruments of the Internet that could be used for evangelization. I was asked to present a sociological reflection on religiosity on the Internet but simple reflections alone did not seem to be sufficient to me. I remember that, when I tried to organize my speech, I stared at a blank computer screen with no idea about where to begin or what to write. I understood that I needed to give a theological speech. It was the moment to say something that was perhaps the fruit of the cognitive impulse that faith frees from oneself in a time like our own, when the Internet's logic shows us ways of thinking, knowing, communicating, and living. I had started to explore a territory that, to me, still seemed to be rather untouched. Bibliographical research helped me understand that a lot had already been written on the pastoral dimension, which understood the Internet as an instrument of evangelization. What, it

appeared to me, was less well studied was a systematic and theological reflection on the topic. My questions were: What impact has the Internet had on the ways in which we understand the Church and ecclesial communion? What impact has it had on the ways in which we think about Revelation, grace, the liturgy, the sacraments, and the classic themes of theology? My April 23, 2010, lecture at the "Digital Witnesses" conference was the first step toward a personal reflection that I still consider to be in its initial phase. The need to confront these questions with courage began to be shared. On February 28, 2011, Benedict XVI, addressing participants at the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, said:

> It is not just that we need to explain the message of the Gospel in today's language, but we have to have the courage to think in a way that is more profound, as happened at other times, about the relationship between the faith, the life of the Church, and the changes that man is living. The task of helping those who have responsibility in the Church to be able to understand, interpret, and talk this "new language" of the media in pastoral situations (cf. *Aetatis novae*, 2) and in dialogue with the contemporary world, asking: What are the challenges that the so-called "digital thought" puts on the faith and on theology? What questions are needed? The world of communication interests the whole of the cultural universe, social and spiritual, of the human being. If the new languages have an impact on the way we think and live, this is in some way relevant also to the world of the faith, its intelligence and its expression. Theology, according to a classic definition, is the intelligence of the faith, and we know well that intelligence, understood as reflective and critical knowledge, is not extraneous to the cultural changes that are underway. Digital culture puts new tasks on our ability to speak and to listen to a symbolic language that speaks of the transcendent. Jesus himself, in his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, knew how to use elements of the culture and ambience of his time: the flocks, the fields, the banquet, seeds, and so on. Today we are called to discover, in digital culture also, the symbols and metaphors that are significant to the people and that can be helpful in speaking about the Kingdom of God to contemporary man. (Benedict XVI 2011a)

This book is my first attempt to answer that call, and it already has an ample and ecumenical life. In any case, thinking about faith in the era of the Internet is not only a reflection in the faith's service; it is both higher and more global. If Christians reflect on the Internet, it is not only in regard to learning how to "use" it, but as an environment to "inhabit." As John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Letter of January 24, 2005, "The Rapid Development": "The Church, which in light of the message of salvation entrusted to it by the Lord is also a teacher of humanity, recognizes the duty to offer its own contribution for a better understanding of outlooks and responsibilities connected with current developments in communications" (John Paul II, 2005). This is the Church's major contribution to the Web, at least from her own viewpoint: to help humans to better understand the profound significance of communication and the media, above all because they "influence the consciousness of individuals, they form the mentality and determine their vision of things" (ibid.). In the development of communication, the Church sees the actions of God, who moves humanity toward a completion. The Internet is, at least in its power, a space of communion that is part of our journey toward this completion. In Christ, we must therefore have a spiritual look at the Web, seeing Christ who calls humanity to be ever more unified and connected.

Another word of warning is in order: I am neither a sociologist nor a computer scientist. On the basis of my academic training—first in philosophy and then in theology—my reflections on the Internet are derived from literary criticism, which has shaped my views since 1994, and my involvement with *Civiltà Cattolica*. It was the critical reading of poetry that led me to become involved with technology, and only theology was able to provide me with the right amount of curiosity and the right categories through which to understand the Internet. The experience of Marshall McLuhan, who faced the new media with an innovative way of looking at them both from a critical literary viewpoint and as a Catholic thinker, has been

a comfort and inspiration to me. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins helped me understand the role of technological innovation; jazz helped me understand the role of social networks; and the theologians—from Thomas Aquinas to Teilhard de Chardin—shed light on the forces that drive us in the world, participating in Creation, and that lift us toward a goal that exceeds it, well beyond any cognitive surplus. It is the research into deeper meanings that allowed me to understand the value of the USB cable that I have in my hand. I know that my iPad has nothing to do with my unquenchable desire to know the world, while my Galaxy Note tells me (even when it is on silent) that I am not meant to remain alone. T. S. Eliot helped me understand how to avoid his own pitfalls. However, Flannery O'Connor helped me understand the importance of the "action of grace in territory held largely by the devil." I thus understand that, if I also see a lot of evil on the Web, I cannot dwell on negative judgment alone if I want to see God in the world's work. And when I see electricity invading my computer, turning it on and making it perform prodigiously, it is the poetry of Karol Wojtyla which tried to explain electrical metaphors used in the Sacrament of Confirmation that draws my astonishment.

Technology, then, explains our desire for a fullness that we always supersede, whether at the level of presence and relationships, or at the level of knowledge: cyberspace underlines our finitude and draws us to satiety. To see it, in some way signifies operating in a field in which spirituality and technology intersect.

Obviously, the pages that follow should be considered as an introduction to a work that is, and will always be, in progress. Since April 23, 2010, I have written a series of articles in *La Civiltà Cattolica* that have led me to engage my reflections at various conferences and meetings, both in Italy and abroad (for example, in Brazil, where that country's Bishops' Council organized a seminar for the bishops that was dedicated to communication on the Web). If my reflection continues, it is also

thanks to the wise stimulus of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, above all in the person of Monsignor Claudio Celli, and the intellectual encouragement of the Pontifical Council for Culture, above all in the person of Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi. It has been a great honor to be named as a consulter to these two Vatican dicasteries. Even though a fundamental part of my reflections on *cybertheology* has been refuted in some writings in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, I have felt a need to provide them for comparison and debate on the Internet. This is why on January 1, 2011, I started my blog, Cyberteologia.it, and then my Facebook page, Cybertheology, a Twitter account (@antoniospadaro), and "The CyberTheology Daily" (http://www.cyber-theology.net), which is a content curation service, as well as a series of other initiatives. In these ways I have sought to render my reflections "social." Finally, since April 2011, I have been editing a column on cybertheology in the monthly magazine *Jesus*.

Consequently, this book is part of an ecosystem of reflections that has developed at many colloquia and through exchanges of ideas with friends and scholars who have helped me to live this research as the fruit of a profound and ample sharing, and for this input I am sincerely grateful.

It is my hope that readers of this book will pick up some elements that form a type of conceptual premise. Firstly, I want to reiterate that the correct questions with which to start to read this book relate to the new existential context that is generated by the media, and to the "anthropological mutation" that results: What is its significance for the faith? In which world do we live? Is it the same one that it used to be? What is the answer to "where do we live?" Today, we also inhabit a digital space. In the digital era, we adopt values that are affected by the fact that the "Word was made flesh and came amongst us."

To me, then, it is important to remember that this book's intent is to unveil scenarios and to feed the desire; not to halt at the "wonders" of technology, but to go to its basis so as to understand how the world is changing and how this change is having

an impact on the life of faith. The technologies are new, not simply because they are different from those that preceded them but because they profoundly change the very concept of having an experience. The ingenuity to believe that they will be at our disposal means neglecting the modification of anything in the way we perceive reality. The Church's duty, like that of all the individual ecclesial communities, is to accompany us on our journey, and the Web has become an integral and irreversible part of this path.

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Cybertheology

The Internet
Between Theology and Technology

Some eighty years after the first commercial use of steam loco-motives, Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure* (1895) was published. In those pages, Sue Bridehead rebuffs Jude's sugges-tion that they sit together in the cathedral: "Cathedral? Yes. Though I think I'd rather sit in the railway station. . . . That's the centre of the town life now." In this exchange, the station is not a *nonspace*, a place of speedy transit; it becomes the center of connections in the heart of the city. The station has become an environment that is also symbolic and not just a simple de-pot for a means of transport. If this is true of the railway sta-tion, it is even more so of the Internet (and by extension the Web) today.

The historian Harold Perkin wrote that the men who built the railway were not only creating a means of transport but also contributing to the creation of a new society and of a new world (Perkin 1970). Those who lived through the rise of the railway in the middle of the nineteenth century considered this means of transport not merely as something new but revolutionary—the railway revolution,[1] a cultural metaphor at

the time. It is interesting to note that every invention that has permitted us to expand and intensify communication and exchange networks—from the printing press to the railway to the telegraph and now the Internet—has been considered revolutionary. If labeling progress *revolutionary* helps us to understand the social relevance of innovations, it also risks hiding a consideration that is more important: innovations seem to respond to our age-old desires for relationships, communication, and knowledge. Seen in this light, the invention of the Internet is perhaps less a novelty of our time than an extension of our desire for communal life and knowledge.

THE INTERNET AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Technology always seems to bring with it an aura that provokes astonishment and disquiet. What are the motives that lie behind and generate these feelings? Is it because technology appears to be able to realize something that responds to our ancient desires and profound fears? Is that why technological innovations touch us, intimidate us, and make us wonder? The Internet is a reality that is part of the everyday lives of many people. We can no longer simply ignore the Internet and return to an "innocent" time, since the functioning of our "primary" world, of the means of communication of every type, is based on the existence of this so-called virtual world that surrounds us (Ottmar 2005; Granieri 2009). Today, the Internet is a place that we frequent in order to stay in contact with friends who live far away, to read the news, to buy a book, to book a vacation, or to share interests and ideas: "It is a space for humans, a space that is populated by human beings. It no longer has a context that is anonymous and aseptic, but has a scope that is anthropologically qualified" (Pompili 2011, 62).

The Internet is a space for experience that is becoming an integral part of everyday life, in a fluid way: a "new existential context."[2] The Internet is therefore not at all a simple *instru-*

ment of communication, which one can choose to use, but it has evolved into a cultural "environment" (Ellul 1980) that determines a style of thought, creating new territories and new types of education, contributing also to the definition of a new way to stimulate the intelligence and to tighten relationships. It is a way to live in and organize our world (Spadaro 2006; Giaccardi 2010). It is not a separate environment, but it is becoming ever more integrated into our everyday lives. As a result, it is not a specific place that we enter at any given time so we can "live" online for a while and then to return to our offline lives.

One of the major challenges—especially for those who are not so-called digital natives—is to dismiss the Internet as a parallel reality (that is, one that is separate from our everyday lives) rather than seeing it as an anthropological space that is deeply intertwined with our everyday lives. Instead of making us leave our world to delve into the virtual world, technology has made the digital world penetrate our ordinary world. The digital media are not doors through which we escape from our reality; they are extensions that enrich our capacity to live out relationships and to exchange information.

THE LIGHTNESS OF DEVICES

The Internet (and by extension the Web) is becoming ever more transparent and invisible. It has an exponential tendency to be no longer the other of our everyday lives. We know very well that to be "wired" or connected, we no longer need to sit in front of a computer; all we need is a smartphone in our pockets,[3] perhaps with push notifications enabled.[4] The Internet is a plane of existence that is becoming more and more integrated with the other planes of our human existence; we no longer perceive the digital media surrounding us as separate entities— they seem to melt into our environment to the point where we hardly notice them anymore (Pompili 2011, 66–68). Think, for example, of tablets like the iPad or its competitors. Like our

cell phones, they are always already turned on, and the time it takes for individual applications to open is negligible, as is switching from one application to another. Nothing now exists that separates us from a screen; everything can be done at the touch of a finger. Even when we want to type some text, we can do so with the help of an on-screen keyboard. It is only on a superficial level that these characteristics seem to be unimportant. In reality, they are radically changing the way we interact with a technological device and use this digital resource. Our relationship with touchscreens becomes physical and our fingers seem to reach (virtually) "inside" the screen. Furthermore, these actions are performed on a small handheld device that only weighs around 1.4 pounds (or less) and can be used anywhere, unlike a desktop computer. Touchscreen technology has become a part of our everyday lives, from automated teller machines to self check-in kiosks at the airport to self check-out machines at the supermarket. The iPad take this type of relationship to digital content to a whole new level, and the barriers between users and product tend to vanish into thin air. In this way, the device is becoming a window, an open frame onto the world of the Web.

If we consider the ease of use of the iPad or similar tablets and their applications, we can see the device is beginning to lose its technological aura, leaving space for a relationship that is more immediate and direct, without any visible mediation. The obstacles to how we interact with a computer—the power-up time, mouse, keyboard, and portability—have been reduced significantly. We are no longer looking at a machine with a liquid crystal display or iron particles on a rigid hard disk. The device becomes, in some way, transparent to the person who has it in his or her hands.

Think about what we are able to accomplish thanks to a device as lightweight and portable as the iPad, the iPhone, or an Android smartphone: We can participate in events and conferences while we are sitting at our desks or traveling the world. We can speak with people who live in another part of the world.

We can perform transactions and order goods on the go, and more. There is an evident displacement that causes the borders between the body and technological devices to become less defined.

Human beings do not remain unchanged when the world around them changes: it is not only the means of communication that are transformed, but the self and its culture. Throughout history, technological advances have transformed the lives and sense of self of human beings. In synthesis, they make up what is almost a story of the human experience of technology. Pierre Lévy, who famously studied the cultural implications of informatization, wrote: "It is the same man who speaks, buries his own dead and naps flints, spreading to us Prometheus' fire to cook our food, to dry the clay, to work with metal, to feed the steam engines, to run along the high voltage cables, to burn in nuclear power plants, to release himself from the arms of war and from the instruments of destruction" (Lévy 2001, 3). He asks rhetorically: "Do technologies come perhaps from another planet, the world of cold machines with no emotions, without any significance or human value, as a certain tradition of thought tends to suggest?" His answer is clear:

> It seems to me, on the contrary, that it is not only technologies that are imagined, realized and re-interpreted when they are used by men, but that it is rather their own intensive use of tools that constitutes humanity as such, or, better, that contributes in a determinate manner to his constitution as we know it. To give an expression that synthesises this: "the human world is, by definition technological." (Ibid.)

It is thus that our humanity unfolds, through the architecture that protects and welcomes us; through the routes and navigation systems that open up new horizons to us; through writing, the telephone, and the cinema, which we fill with signs and

symbols. Think of the invention of the alphabet and its impor-
tance for our progress toward civil institutions, for example; we
can be citizens of a complex world because we can write (and
read) the laws. Our world would look very different without
the invention of fire, the wheel, and the alphabet. Human be-
ings have always sought to interpret the world through tech-
nologies that have allowed us to capture a semblance of the
world around us, such as photography and motion pictures,
for example; representations that open new cognitive spaces
for interaction between the subject and the outside world.
Technology is, therefore, not an ensemble of modern "*avant-garde
objects*" (Turkle 2008). Through use of these means human
beings exercise their own capacity for knowledge, freedom,
and responsibility.[5]

The Internet is, therefore, a reality that is necessarily becom-
ing ever more interesting to a believer, affecting his or her ca-
pacity to comprehend reality and therefore his or her faith and
way of living it. One's faith and the way of living it are influen-
tial in their interventions into a person's experiences, permitting
him or her to increase his or her human potential. The influence
they exert, with which we are more or less conversant, depends
in good measure on our perception of ourselves, of others, and
of the world. Without prejudices, they can be considered to be
resources, even though they require critical scrutiny and wise
and responsible usage (CEI 2010, no. 51).

It is evident that the Internet, emerging from a long history
of innovations and technological advances, cannot but have an
effect on the comprehension of the faith and the Church. The
logic of the Internet can model theological logic, and the Inter-
net now poses interesting challenges for the comprehension of
Christianity itself, highlighting both what is compatible and the
possible incompatibilities. *Redemptoris Missio* (no. 37)—published
in 1990, a year after the Web's invention and some three years
before it began to reach a larger public—states that the media
have not only the channels to spread the news and gossip many
times over but that there is also a more profound reason why

the evangelization of modern culture to a great degree depends on their influence. It is not enough to use the media to spread the Christian message and the Magisterium of the Church; there is a need to integrate the message itself into this new culture that has been created by modern communication. This is a complex problem because that culture was born before the creation of its content since there are new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques, and new psychological attitudes. John Paul II understood well that a re-formation of the mind was necessary (Tremolada 2009).

Fundamentally, Christianity is a communicative event. Everything in Christian Revelation and the pages of the Bible exudes communication: the heavens tell us about the glory of God, angels are his messengers, and the prophets speak in his name. The Bible, in its own way—with its interpretations of angels, the burning bush, tablets of stone, dreams, donkeys, whispers and breaths of light wind—becomes one of the media that realize this communication. And the Christian news has, in Christ's invitation to "go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16.15), which is its thrust. On the other hand, the words of Exodus 20.4 are precise: "You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth."[6] The God of Exodus puts us on our guard against making images, from a technology that substantially exposes idolatry and reduces the other to something amongst other things. These two Bible verses, in essence, describe well the constant dialectic of Christians on the Web and their approach to the technology of communication: news that is based on knowledge and relationships is one thing, the technology that models its own media idols is quite another.

The Church is naturally present where humans develop their capacity for knowledge and relationships. Announcing a message and relationships of communion have always been two of the founding pillars of her being. The task, therefore, does not have to be how to *use* the Web well, as is often thought, but

how to *live* well in the era of the Web. In this sense, the Web is not a new *means* of evangelization but is, above all, a context in which the faith is called to express itself not by a mere willingness to be present, but by the compatibility of Christianity with the lives of human beings.[7]

THE SPIRITUALITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology is not only, as the most skeptical believe, a means to live the illusion of taming the forces of nature so as to lead a happy life. It would be reductive to consider this only as the fruit of a will for power and domination. It is rather "a profoundly human fact, tied to the autonomy and liberty of man" (Benedict XVI 2009a, no. 69). Through technology, "the mastery of the spirit over the material" is expressed and confirmed, and at the same time human aspirations and the tensions of our soul are manifested. Technology is, therefore, the organizational force exercised on the material by a knowing human project. In this sense, technology is ambiguous, because our freedom also can be used for evil (no. 70). It is just because of our nature that technology makes its mark on our way of understanding the world and not just on our way of living it:

> It is impossible to separate the human being from his material environment, from the signs and images through which he makes sense of life and the world. In the same way, one cannot separate the material world—and even less its artificial part—from the ideas through which technological objects are conceived and used by the men who invent them, produce them and use them. (Lévy 2001, 4)

For example, the airplane has led us to understand the world in a way that is different from the way we understood it after the invention of the wheeled cart; likewise, the printing press has made us understand culture in a different way. However, it is also true that both the airplane and the printing press have made us understand human beings better. The believer knows how to see the human response to the call of God, to which we

give shape and transform creation, and thus even himself, through technology with the help of devices and procedures (Monsma 1986). In that same sense, John Paul II (2013) called for a "sacralisation" of human ingenuity. Benedict XVI (2009, nos. 70, 77), in his turn, spoke of the "extraordinary potential of the new technologies," which he defined as "a true gift to humanity." A question arises spontaneously at this point: if technology, in particular the digital revolution, changes our way of thinking, then does this not mean that we, in some way have to reconsider the faith and how to communicate it (Benedict XVI 2011).[8]

A crucial moment in the spiritual understanding of the new technologies was the promulgation of the Decree of the Second Vatican Council, *Inter Mirifica,* on December 4, 1963, which exhorts:

> Among the wonderful technological discoveries which men of talent, especially in the present era, have made with God's help, the Church welcomes and promotes with special interest those which have a most direct relation to men's minds and which have uncovered new avenues of communicating most readily news, views and teachings of every sort. The most important of these inventions are those media which, such as the press, movies, radio, television and the like, can, of their very nature, reach and influence, not only individuals, but the very masses and the whole of human society, and thus can rightly be called the media of social communication. (No. 1)

In June 19, 1964, Paul VI, visiting the Automation Center at the Aloisianum of Gallarate, used words that, in my opinion, are of a disconcerting beauty. The center was working on an electronic analysis of the *Summa Theologicae* of St. Thomas Aquinas, and also on the text of the Bible.

> Science and technology, once more twinned, are prodigious and, at the same time, have let us glimpse new mysteries. However, it is enough for Us to grasp the inner meaning of this Audience, to note that in the modern context, this service is at the disposal of culture; as the mechanical brain comes to the aid of the spiritual one, and

how much more is expressed in its own language, that is, thought, which seems to like to be dependent on it. Have you not begun to apply coded procedures to the text of the Latin Bible? What will happen? Is it, perhaps, that this sacrosanct text will be reduced to marvellous games by the mechanics of automation, like any other insignificant text? Or, is it not this effort of infusing into mechanical instruments the reflection of spiritual functions, which is ennobled and raised to become a service that touches the sacred? Is it the spirit that has become imprisoned by the material, or is it perhaps that the material, already given and required to execute the laws of the spirit, offers to the spirit itself a sublime respect? It is at this point that Our Christian ear can hear the groaning of which Saint Paul speaks (Romans, 8, 22), the groaning of natural creatures who aspire to a higher level of spirituality?[9]

Paul VI affirms that the "mechanical brain comes to the aid of the spiritual one." He adds that man makes the "effort to infuse the mechanical instruments with the reflection of spiritual functions" and continues by affirming that, thanks to technology, the material offers "to the same spirit, a sublime respect." The pope hears the cries of an aspiration for a higher level of spirituality that are rising from *homo tecnologicus*. The technological being is still a spiritual being.[10]

Technological development can "induce the idea of the self-sufficiency of the technology itself when man asks himself only 'how?,' and does not consider the many, because from them he is pushed to act"; the absolutism of technique "tends to produce an incapacity to perceive that which cannot be explained simply by the material" (Benedict XVI 2009a, nos. 70, 77). If this has been understood correctly, it can instead be expressed as a form of longing for "transcendence" in regard to the human condition (see George 2006, 87–90; Beaudoin 1998, 87), so that it is lived currently. One must also say this of that "open space of communication for intercommunication in the world by computers and informatic memories," that is, so-called cyberspace.[11] The theologian Tom Beaudoin has noted that this

space—so unusual because of the rapidity of its connections—represents the desire of human beings for a fullness that is always at a higher level, whether of presence and relationships or of knowledge. "Cyberspace underlines our finitude," "reflects our desire for the infinite, the divine." Seeking such fullness signifies, then, working in a field "in which spirituality and technology intersect" (Beaudoin 1998, 87).[12]

This alone is certainly not a topic that is relevant to today only. It was amenable, for example, to reflection by Cardinal Avery Dulles, who, at the start of the 1970s, proposed to uncover in this way "the changing styles of communication that are influencing the knowledge of the Church, in its nature, in its message, in its mission" (Dulles 1971, 5),[13] insisting on the relationships between theology and communication. One can continue on the dense network of reports that this interest has developed across time (Soukup, 1983).[14] Recent research has found at least seven areas for reflection:

> Pastoral theology, which relates to the communication of the Christian message.
> Applied theology, which uses its own theological instruments to respond to the demands of communication.
> The application of theological categories (the Trinity, incarnation, etc.) to communication, so as to be able to understand them better.
> The use of instruments of communication to analyze religious texts.
> The use of the content of film, television, music, and so on to promote theological reflection.
> The study of communication as a context for theology.
> The use of the structures of communication to modulate theological reflection.

In this present context, it is the last two areas of reflection that are of interest. By pausing at these intersections, one obtains a

desire to verify the possibility of a "cybertheology." Even if experiences that are specifically religious cannot be understood as being dependent on communication techniques, it is evident that telematic technologies are beginning to have an influence on the way we think the Christian faith and, above all, on the categories of comprehension. Obviously, I do not intend to put forward some sort of technological determinism but, rather, to propose a reflection on the context in which it is already developing today, and on the ways in which theological reflection will develop tomorrow.

INFORMATICS, LANGUAGE, AND THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE FAITH

If we want to see how telematic technologies are beginning to influence the way of thinking the Christian faith and its language we have to look no further than the field of informatics and its use of language. When using a computer and files of various types, we use words like *save* and *convert*, but also *justify*, for example; saving a text document, converting files of different types of electronic format, justifying the text. These three words are very familiar to theologians,[15] and behind them lies an important intuition, one that is not simply tied to a way of *saying* the faith, but perhaps also to a way of *thinking* it. In this context it is illuminating to look at the theological roots of these terms and compare how they are used in informatics (Forte 2006). It might be still more interesting, though, to understand the impact that recapturing these terms could have on the intelligence of the faith.[16] It is further necessary to understand that it is possible to speak of a "digital intelligence" and detail its characteristics.[17] This is still uncharted territory; the two environments, theology and informatics, certainly seem methodologically to be completely distinct and separate. In any case, the language and the metaphors mold our way of imagining and understanding the general reality. We need a broad anthro-

pological approach to technology to understand what is being discussed. As the writer Michael Fuller—theologian and organic chemist, and the author of *Atoms and Icons*—writes, theologians can look at scientific and technological evolution to understand what it says about our world, and which metaphors and analogies can nourish theological thought (Fuller 1995; 2010).

SAVING, CONVERTING, JUSTIFYING, SHARING

This section is nothing more than an attempt to open a path for reflection.

What does it signify to save a text file, or a photograph, that has just been edited? To save something in the digital world signifies saving it from oblivion, from forgetting, from cancellation. To save, in a theological sense, signifies saving from damnation, from condemnation. Forgiveness is salvation from condemnation. Salvation and forgiveness are terms that seek each other. When saving digital files, salvation is instead the exact opposite of cancellation. If a file is saved, everything, including the errors, is retained. Note that digital saving cancels oblivion. Today, the Web has become the place in which oblivion is impossible, the place in which our traces remain potentially uncancellable. If one wanted to reinvent a new life, the traces of our past would always be there.

To clarify, if a person who has led a dissolute life, dedicated to pornography, decides to turn his life around, his images will continue to exist on the Web, reminding everyone of what he used to be and, in the virtual world, thus will always remain. Digital *saving* (i.e., rescue) of the pornstar, paradoxically coincides with the impossibility of his *pardon*. However, this is only an extreme example. A practical application of what I am talking about is represented, for example, in technology: on opening an email, or visiting certain websites. For example, the email service or website automatically collects some information about

the person reading the mail or visiting the website. So "before the difficulty of living in a world without forgiveness, we must . . . find new ways to lose the digital traces that we always leave behind us" (Rosen 2010).

Above all, today more than ever, we understand better how forgiveness does not coincide at all with oblivion and that authentic pardon is an operation that transcends my story and comes out of the system of my possibilities, being founded on God's alterity. In the world in which "my sin stays always before" (Psalms 52.5) and all is digitally saved, how is it still possible to think of religious salvation? This is also the case for conversion. To convert a file signifies changing it into another format. It is a question of coding and thus of language. Digital conversion is a translation of sorts. The conversion of a file can be necessary because the application that we are using cannot *read* or open it. As the user, I cannot relate to the data that it contains because I am unable to decipher the data and have a need to do so and for this reason I convert the file to a format that permits me to enter into a relationship with these data. Conversion is thus the redemption of incommunicability. Can technological conversion have an effect on the comprehension of religious conversions? In this case, if we consider the interesting connotations of opening (to open a file) and the restoration of a communicative relationship (reading a file) that technological conversion involves, we illuminate theological conversion through the original significance of reopening a broken relationship to re-establish a contact that generates sense. *To save* and *to convert* are simply two examples. With the rise of social networks, we can also add *to share* and *community* (Sequeri 2010, 43). The risk of mixing levels becomes easy and the risk that we may fall into a sort of "ideology" of the Web is even larger.[18] In any case, we must be aware that the culture of cyberspace, beyond any other consideration, objectively poses new challenges to our capacity to formulate and hear a symbolic public language that speaks of the possibility of and the signs of transcendence in our lives. The software that "transports atoms of culture"

(Manovich 2010, 14) is, in fact, already the daily bread of millions of people, and the question of language cannot be reduced in any way to that of the provisional "coating" of concepts that are always equal and identical to themselves.[19]

The choice of language to which I have referred is only the first level of reflection. How, in the fullest manner, does digital culture shape the way we form a discourse on God and the faith, especially if this discourse is specifically Catholic?

Until now, discussions on religion and the Web have largely focused on cyberreligion,[20] techno-agnosticism, and technopaganism[21]—in short, these discussions have paid more attention to the *religious* than to the *theological* dimension, at the risk of flattening and approving specific identities and theologies when these identities and theologies should no longer be subjected to this homogenizing, sociological approach. Certainly, the fact that several forms of virtual religiosity have been born on the Web is the epiphenomenon of a complex and ample change in the comprehension of the sacred (Schroeder, Heather, and Lee 1998). Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to stop there (Pace and Giordan 2010, 761–81). In reality, reflection on cybertheology is in its early stages, but its epistemology is as yet uncertain. The term *cybertheological reflection*, in fact, is rarely used, and often its sense is not obvious. The question, instead, is clear: if the electronic media and digital technologies "modify the way of communicating and even that of thinking, what impact will they have on the way we do theology?" (Berger 1996, 195). The first timid and rapid attempts to arrive at a definition have in reality sought to clarify the terms under which the questions are asked.

Susan George (2006, 182) has gathered four definitions of cybertheology as examples of possible understandings. The first definition is framed as the theology of the meanings of social communication in the era of the Internet and of advanced

technologies. The second is understood as a pastoral reflection on how to communicate the Gospel through the Web's own capacity. The third definition she interprets as a phenomenological map of the presence of the religious on the Internet. The fourth one, on how to trawl the Web, is understood as a place with spiritual capacities. Her approach is an interesting first attempt to define a field for reflection. The English theologian Debbie Herring has distinguished three sections: "theology in," "theology of," and "theology for" cyberspace.[22] The first collects theological materials that are available on the Web; the second offers a list of theological contributions to the study of cyberspace; the third consists of a collection of places in which one can form theology on the Web (forums, sites, mailing lists). These distinctions are interesting and provide some key clarification that enriches reflection on theology in cyberspace.

Carlo Formenti (2008, 59–107) refers to cybertheology as the study of the theological connotations of technoscience, a "theology of technology." George, by contrast, tends to keep technology and theology separate. The monograph fascicle of the journal *Concilium* (2005)—entitled "Cyber-spazio, cyber-etica, cyber-teologia" (Cyber-space, cyber-ethics, cyber-theology)—implicitly seems to define cybertheology as the study of spirituality expressed on the Internet and of the everyday representation and imagination of the sacred. Consequently, this deals with reflections on changes in the relationships with God and transcendence. In this book, I seek a new status, a more precise one, for this discipline that seems so difficult to define. It is necessary to consider cybertheology as being the intelligence of the faith in the era of the Internet, that is, reflection on the thinkability of the faith in the light of the Web's logic. This refers to reflection that is born from the question about the mode in which the Web's logic—with its powerful metaphors that work on the imaginary, beyond intelligence—can model the listening to and reading of the Bible. It can also model the ways of understanding the classical themes of systematic theology: the Church and ecclesial communion, Revelation, liturgy, the sacraments.

Reflection is more important than ever, because it is easy to note how the Internet increasingly helps shape people's identities in general and those of "digital natives" in particular (Lövheim and Linderman 2005, 121–37).

Cybertheological reflection is always a reflexive knowledge that starts from the experience of faith. This becomes theology in the sense that it responds to the *formula fides quarens intellectum.* Cybertheology is not, therefore, a sociological reflection on religiosity on the Internet, but is the fruit of faith that frees from itself a cognitive impulse at a time when the Web's logic marks the way of thinking, knowing, communicating, and living.

Perhaps I should emphasize that it is not sufficient to consider cybertheological reflection as one of the many cases of "contextual theology," which holds cybertheological reflection in a specific manner in the human context in which it is expressed. At present, this is certainly the case. However, the Web cannot be simply isolated as a specific and determinate case from our everyday lives but has to be seen as an integral part of our ordinary existence.[23] Digital culture claims to connect people with one another, opening up new relationships (Spadaro 2010). Of course, this is not without ambiguities. A society that is based on a web of connections poses significant challenges, not just for the pastoral—which the Church has accepted already for some time[24]—but also for the comprehension of the Christian faith itself, starting with its use of language. The image that perhaps illustrates the role and claims of Christianity before digital culture is that of the carver of the sycamores, borrowed from the prophet Amos (7.14) and interpreted by St. Basil. The then Cardinal Ratzinger, in his discourse at the Media Parables Conference, used this fortunate image to say that Christianity is like a cut on a fig.[25] The sycamore tree produces a lot of insipid fruit that remains inedible if not treated properly. For St. Basil, the fruit or figs represent the culture of his time. The Christian Logos is a cut that permits culture to mature, and the cut requires wisdom, because it is done well at the correct

moment. Digital culture is rich with fruit to press and the Christian is called to undertake the work of mediating between the Logos and digital culture. This work is not without challenges, but nonetheless demands our attention. In particular, we must begin to think about the Web theologically, but also about the theology in the Web's logic. The first question is: what faith do we find in the anthropological space that is the Web?