

Reflections of a young computer engineer and seminarian

The Digital Age: Challenge or Opportunity for Young People?

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It would take entire books to enter into the current youth reality relative to digital technologies. But we mention the following reflection by Italian psychologist Tonino Cantelmi:

...[T]oday's younger generation is caught between powerful forces that gradually weaken their sense of trust and hope. There is the silencing of desire. The "tech-nanny-dependent" child is one whose wishes are met before they even have the chance to express them. Constantly anticipated or pacified with food, television, disposable toys, and video games, children end up without real desires – or rather, without learning how to form clear and personal ones. Because they never "practice" recognizing their own genuine needs, distinguishing them from those imposed from outside, or from the soothing distractions that make them forget those needs, they fail to learn perseverance. As a result, they rarely experience the deep satisfaction that comes from truly fulfilling an original, authentic need¹.

This dynamic, the author notes, lies "at the root of a psychological nihilism that drifts among young people like a troubling ghost, slipping into the depths of their souls." Here Cantelmi gives voice to thoughts often heard in society, in uneven, shapeless ways, and to a reality that is advancing with impressive speed. Yet, if we stop to listen to young people individually, we will be surprised to see how much they feel a need to express their doubts, needs and desires.

Technology and social relationships

The word *technology* – *τεχνολογία* (*technologhía*) – is made up of *τέχνη* (*techne*), meaning "art" (skill or craftsmanship), and *λογία* (*loghía*), meaning "discourse" or "expression." Because it is a form of art, it originates from the human person, from human intellect and reason. This point is essential, because it forces us to reconsider the place and use of technology in our daily lives.

We often discuss technological issues in connection with social trends without actually understanding the subject matter, relying instead on preconceived ideas. Today's youth culture is increasingly fast-paced and eager to explore this digital "art" that allows people – near or far – to communicate quickly, often removing almost entirely the non-verbal dimension (body language) of the message. This leads to problems in understanding both the message and the emotions behind it; at times, it also lowers inhibitions. One can say almost anything online without having to answer to anyone about whether the message is true.

The value of face-to-face communication

As already mentioned, young people today yearn for direct communication between two people who are physically present with one another. When we stop and spend time with them – truly listening and engaging in real dialogue – we see how naturally they can learn, through contact with adults, to express themselves and to live relationships in which the whole person is communicated and shared. Young people, for their part, can help adults enter and understand the digital world.

We see examples of this on our streets: when students leave school, they stop to talk about their needs, preferences, weaknesses, or ideas. This shows us that nothing has been lost. Rather it simply needs to be rediscovered and guided toward healthy, natural expression. Young people always find new ways to express themselves – not only through technology, but also when they meet face-to-face in everyday life. We might ask ourselves whether we are able to notice these moments and remain open, giving them the space and time to be free enough to come to us. And within our families, too, we can model how and when digital tools are used.

The Digital World: a talent to be used well

A technology is not right or wrong in itself, but rather in the way that it is used. History teaches us this, for example, regarding the splitting of the atom for medical use. Or the knife made of obsidian in the Paleolithic era that was used for hunting, but also for defense. And this equally applies to information technologies, where we find digital realities that are created to relate to us and others in different ways. A central role belongs to the family and to adults who must accompany young people through this experience. This is possible only if we avoid demonizing digital technology and new forms of artificial intelligence, and instead try to understand how to live with them in a healthy way.

It is true that these developments are unfolding at a frantic pace in our era – and they will continue to do so. But we only need to think back to the invention of the printed newspaper: many people could hear or read news that had not been verified. We are living something similar today, constantly bombarded by digital information, and we must continually practice discernment.

As Christians, we can find guidance in the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14–30), helping young people not to bury the problem in the ground, but to recognize in it a "talent" that can be used in a healthy and fruitful way. In fact, the very speed of technological change can help young people respond, find their own place, and develop their own approach to

the digital world. The goal is not to oppose innovation, but to remain faithful to Christ – and therefore to the brilliance of the human mind and heart – so that technology truly serves us.

¹ T. Cantelmi, *Tecnoliquidità. Psychology in the age of the internet: the technological mind*, Edizioni San Paolo, Turin 2013, p. 64.