A Reflection on the Internet and the Spiritual Life

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When discussing potential pitfalls of engaging with Orthodox content online, the focus is almost exclusively on the content available and its potential harms or benefits. Is it good to listen to generalized pastoral advice broadcasted to an audience the pastor will never meet? Is it good to listen to debates? Is any of it good? I would like to provide a different angle of this for your consideration, and reflect on how the Internet itself might impact our spiritual life and formation as Orthodox Christians. This is often an overlooked reality that I believe we must be aware of and deeply contemplate as we seek to be united to Christ in His Church.

In Nicholas Carr's book *The Shallows*, he provides a useful illustration. In it he describes a scenario where one must fill a bathtub with water by transferring water from a running faucet with a spoon. It would of course take a long time to fill the tub, but if the water is running at a slow enough rate one can reliably fill the spoon and bring it over to the tub with minimal spillage. Now imagine that the water is coming from a fire hose; the flow is so powerful that not only would it launch itself out of the spoon, it would likely rip the spoon from your hand! It would be impossible to transfer water to the tub if the firehose was the source, or at least you would get more water outside of the tub than inside the tub.

Carr is explaining our ability to retain information. In his illustration, the tub is our long term memory, the spoon is our short term memory, the water is information, and the source of the water is the medium that carries said information. In order for us to truly remember something, we must be able to reliably transfer it from our short term memory to our long term memory. Here the means of obtaining information is critical: too much information in a short period of time will result in the loss of most if not all of what we have taken in. Information must be taken in at a human scale, so how information is obtained is as important if not more important than the information itself.

The internet does not provide information at human scale. I strongly encourage all users of the internet to read *The Shallows* for a thorough explanation of this. If we use the internet as our primary source of information, we are overloading our short term memory and ensuring that we will remember little of what we try to take in. Human scale mediums must be our primary source of information if we are to reliably acquire knowledge: books, conversation, and physical art/imagery are the primary forms of human scale medium. Engaging with these forms employs a multitude of factors that slow us down and prevent us from overloading our mind. They are like the small faucet that we can slow down to a drip. The internet, conversely, employs a multitude of factors that actively inhibit memory retention, essentially reducing our brains to reference libraries. We might know what website/video/article has the information we want, but we need to access that site every time we want the information. As quickly as we leave many sources of information online, they are gone from our memory, or greatly diminished.

All of this is vital in the spiritual life. The Fathers identify 3 primary types of knowledge: theoretical, actual, and spurious. Theoretical knowledge is information that has the potential to

become knowledge, but hasn't been actualized. An example of this would be "knowing" that almsgiving is spiritually beneficial before ever giving alms. Actual knowledge is information that has been embodied. One will truly know that almsgiving is spiritually beneficial when they experience the freedom from material goods resulting in giving those goods to those in need. Spurious knowledge is the rejection of theoretical knowledge in favor of falsehood. One who rejects almsgiving because they want to hoard their wealth, believing that greed is a virtue, is holding to spurious knowledge. In short, we do not truly know something if we have not made it a part of us through action.

These three types of knowledge can be applied to Carr's illustration well. The water in our spoon is theoretical knowledge. We can make it actual knowledge by carefully transferring it to the tub via putting the information to practice. If we overwhelm ourselves with too much theoretical knowledge at once, i.e. jumping from link to link, video to video, etc., we are ensuring that the theoretical knowledge is falling out of the spoon and onto the floor, where it will help no one. We must therefore be very careful to not overwhelm ourselves with information, even good information, lest we lose the chance of truly acquiring it and growing closer to Christ through it. There truly is such a thing as too much of a good thing.

There is further danger in informational overload besides hindering our ability to embody what we take in. One of the eight vices is listlessness, also known as sloth. In our society sloth is identified as a lack of activity, but the fathers identify two extremes of sloth, no activity or an abundance of vain activity. One can either sit around and do nothing, thus ensuring that they aren't spiritually striving, or they can fill themselves to the brim with so much activity that it is impossible to identify what is actually useful, and thus gain nothing from an excess of activity. When we try to gain knowledge through the firehose of the internet, it is akin to the excessive extreme of idleness: we guarantee that we will retain nothing if we try to acquire too much too fast.

Listlessness impacts us in more ways than inhibiting actual knowledge. When we overwork our ability to process theoretical knowledge, we lose the ability to discern what is good and bad. We are putting ourselves in a place where we cannot discern what can and should be embodied as true knowledge in our current spiritual state, thus opening ourselves to embodying information that is spurious and harmful to our souls. This is how many are deceived, through losing discernment due to drowning in a fire hose of information, both good and bad. This is the main reason why so many people on the internet claim to be Orthodox yet believe all sorts of nonsense.

The goal of catechism is to provide the catechumen with the theoretical knowledge necessary to build a stable life in Christ. That being said, it is up to us to take that knowledge and make it our own through putting it to practice. This is why, even though some of our catechetical material is only available in online articles, I encourage our catechumens to print and read it in a physical format. This is also why the Church is adorned in iconography, why the Church relies on the human voice for communal prayer and worship, and why the Church has relied on books and confession as the primary means of spiritual guidance. The Church

operates at human scale, and we should be careful to operate within the limits natural to us. We do not need to know everything all at once, we need to learn what the Lord is teaching us at the time He reveals it to us. This requires patience, restraint, and discernment. May God grant us these traits!