Digital Incarnation

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"In the beginning was the Word...and the Word was made flesh," so says John the Beloved.[1] It is unfortunate that because we have been reared in a Print Culture tainted by a Protestant evangelical disdain for anything visual, it is letters, pages, and books that shapes our notion of Jesus. But Jesus, as Paul would put it in his letter to the Colossians, is the very "image of the invisible God."[2] The intangible Word spoken at the beginning of creation, prophesied in the written scrolls of the Old Testament, assumed a visual form in Nazareth, and was nailed on the cross for the world to see. But today, 2,000 year later, evangelicals know him only in written form and in a very few instances, in loose pages of coloring materials used in Sunday Schools. But as Andrew Walls reminds us the gospel possess an "infinite translatability." He said,

> "This principle (of translatability) brings Christ to the heart of each culture where he finds acceptance; to the burning questions within that culture, to the points of reference within it by which people know themselves."[3]

When Jesus physically left the earth, he made sure to it that he left behind a visual image that the world can feel, see and touch –the Body of Christ –physical persons with flesh and blood. As Bishop Graham Cray would say, "The body of Christ is called to bear the image of the biblical Christ."[4] Throughout history, Christ came to people in the guise of a crusading army, an invading colonial power, a struggling but armed minority yearning for liberation, and even as an entrepreneur that markets the faith with tenacious profitability. But now the Body of Christ has assumed a digital mode of existence. Walter Wilson termed it as the 'Internet Church' in the year 2000.[5] Thirteen years later the online community of faith has ably surf and dive into the waves of digital technology. The Body of Christ has gone on-line. Jesus in his latest incarnation has his arms, hands and feet in digital form. Jesus in is the chat rooms, e-groups, and social networking sites with profiles and 'selfies' for all the world to see.

Jesus would have wanted for the world to know his disciple by their self-less display of sacrificial love for one another. Whether off-line or on-line. Schultze warns us of "the lightness of our digital

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[1] John 1:1, 14 (New International Version)
[2] Colossians 1:15 (New International Version)
[3] Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Orbis: 1996) page 23.
[4] Graham Cray, *On Not Knowing the End at the Beginning* (http://themissionalnetwork.com/index.php/on-not-knowing-the-end-at-the-beginning). Accessed February 4, 2014.
[5] Walter Wilson, *The Internet Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

being." He says, "Information technology facilitates our messaging, but it cannot make us more responsible messengers. Responsibility is a matter of the heart not of machines."[6]

Again, this has profound implications for doing local theology in two significant ways.

Amplification and Amputation

We must, first, note the insight that McLuhan made regarding the way media *amplifies* our senses.[7] On the one hand, media is an extension of man –of our sense faculties. The camera is an extension of our eyes. Radio is an extension of our lips. Mobile phone is an extension of our ears and mouth. Media allows us to amplify the capacity of our sense of sight, hearing, touch, etc. When the Body of Christ assumed digital form, it amplified its physical presence to gain a virtual presence in the cyber space. Facetime, Skype and Google Hangout allow us to be present that defies the limits of space and time.

But by way of amplifying one sense, McLuhan also notes that media, also, in return, *amputates* other senses.[8] This can be seen on how print media trained us to read and therefore think in logical and linear fashion. However, it also sapped our oral capacity and think in lateral terms. Google might have amplified our sense of touch by letting our fingers do the trick of flipping through hundreds of pages on information in just one click. However, it also amputated our mental capacity to memorize and store information in our brains by rote memory.

It must be said that long before social media rocked the private word of Western individuals and pushed them to be more 'social' and 'communal', the Filipinos has always been 'social' and 'communal.' It should not be a surprise at all that the Philippines shoot to the top of being the world's 'Social Media Capital.' We naturally love people, chit-chats, eating, and making 'palabas' or what Irving Goffman calls as the "presentation of the public self."[9] Facebook and Twitter merely amplified these to global proportions. What got amputated, however, is our capacity to communicate and build community just by being together. Google Hangout is no substitute for actual 'pag-tambay.'

By gaining an almost omnipresent visual presence through the latest communication technologies, social media has amputated our sense of touch. All look but no touch. We now have faces that we cannot embrace. We do 'FaceTime'[10] because in reality we do not want to cut-off time to meet

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[6] Quentin Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic) page 190, 199.

[7] Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (University of Toronto Press, 1992). The McLuhans said that the effect of media is four-fold: enhance, reverse, retrieve, and obsolesce.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Iriving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Public Life* (Anchor Books, 1959).

[10] FaceTime is a video calling technology introduced by Apple. It takes advantage of a digital camera on these devices that faces the user to allow for video calls. It shows the caller to the receiver of the call, and vice versa. (http://ipod.about.com/od/iphonesoftwareterms/g/facetime-defintion.htm). Accessed February 4, 2014.

people 'face-to-face.'[11] We have compassionate voices that may neither feel the hands of the hungry, the helpless, and the dying. Such poses danger to a faith whose chief virtue is tangible acts of love for one's neighbor. Even enemies.

Surfing Simulacra

This brings us to the second point –the danger of what the French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard calls as 'simulacra.' "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth -it is the truth which conceals that there is none."[12] Simply put simulacra are copies that depict things that either had no reality to begin with, or that no longer have an original. This grave process of 'simulation' goes through the following stages:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.[13]

In the world of social media, the first step of mimicry could easily be seen in instances where an online community extends or re-create the activities of church meetings and fellowships. The second step makes itself felt when the online community makes you feel as if it is better than the actual church gatherings. Nostalgia shifts sides with the copy rather than the original. The third step happens when the online community starts to become a substitute. The last and final step is born when the simulation takes a life of its own apart and without any reference to that which is originally sought to just mimic. This happens as the online fellowship becomes a full-pledged Internet church without any link whatsoever to actual face-to-face community of believers. This is the point where Baudrillard would say, "The simulacrum is true" and that by "substituting signs of the real for the real itself...Never again will the real have to be produced."[14] Anyone who dares surf the vast ocean of digital media might as well be warned of the dangers of falling for the whirlpool of simulacra. It has the power to make you crave for the digital rather than the actual. Like when you would rather do 'church' online rather than settle for the actual thing. Bazin and Cottin, in their study of virtual churches, extend a word of caution,

> "The Church should engage the virtual world in the name of the gospel, but making a place for Christianity in the virtual world does not mean that Christianity should itself become virtual or disembodied."[15]

As more and more Filipinos become increasingly charmed by the visual and virtual realities of social media, one might as well ask, "Where am I more 'present?'" How does one become deceived

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[11] Shane Hipps argues that digital social networking can make us feel that "being together is nice but not essential." Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) page 115.

[12] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1994) page 1.

[13] Ibid., page 6.

[14] Ibid., page 2.

[15] Jean Nicolas Bazin and Jérôme Cottin, *Virtual Christianity: Potential and Challenge for the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004) page 2.

by a mere simulacrum of virtual existence? As we switch online to off-line, which 'presence' do we take to be more real and authentic? As we get pre-occupied with a barrage of notifications and updates from our various social media networks, let us be reflexive and observe how social reality squares-off with the virtual.

Conclusion

The waves that social media calls us to navigate is by no means easy. As they say, the devil is in the details. Dr. Melba Maggay warns us, "Many societies hobble and are continually disempowered by 'strongholds of the mind,' those subtle and pernicious lies just below the threshold of our consciousness. What the Germans call 'Zeitgeist' or the 'spirit of the times' are usually influences emanating from the 'prince of the power of the air.' Along with their technological savvy, the new generation must be equipped to discern the seductions of this power, to smell the hidden rot and name the ways by which evil 'comes up softly like a flower' as the poet Baudelaire says."[16]

For the local theologian, the question could be put this way: how would the virtual (which is global), relate to the actual (which is local)? If a tree fell in a far flung forest and no one from there 'tweets' about it, did it really fall? Would it matter at all? Questions like these not only stir a fresh challenge but provide as well a viable content for local theologizing.

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[16] Melba Maggay, *"Justice and Approaches to Social Change" in Micah's Challenge* (Paternoster: Milton Keynes, 2009) page 131-132.