

# Friendship as a Theological Category

## *Amizade como Categoria Teológica*

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### Abstract

Friendship is a universal and proper phenomenon of the human condition that is born of the free offer of oneself to launch itself into the mystery of the other. Through it, the men become capable of finding a way to their humanization. This article portrays the role of friendship, especially in the digital age and the ways that Christians must go through to reach their identity in this relevant mean of communication, that overcomes the distance to allow the encounter. However, this technology never determines a society, it is what makes its choices.

**Keywords:** Friendship; Community; Internet; Communication; Christians.

### Resumo

A amizade é um fenómeno universal e próprio da condição humana que nasce da livre oferta de si mesmo para lançar-se ao mistério do outro. Por meio dela, os homens tornam-se capazes de encontrar um caminho para sua humanização. Este artigo retrata o papel da amizade, sobretudo na era digital, e os caminhos que o cristão deve percorrer para alcançar sua

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identidade neste relevante meio de comunicação, que ultrapassa a distância para permitir o encontro. Porém, esta tecnologia jamais determina uma sociedade, é ela que faz suas escolhas.

**Palavras-chave:** Amizade; Comunidade; Internet; Comunicação; Cristãos.

### Introduction

The digital space is a perennial reality of the contemporary world, which in exponential proportion has been promoting innovations capable of bringing about a revolution in the patterns of human relationships<sup>1</sup>. In the face of this irrevocable scenario, the attempt to conceptualize friendship in this digital age can result in the risk of its impoverishment or its hypervalorization<sup>2</sup>. The adequate elucidation for this format of conviviality remains in constant development, since, synchronically, as it seems to grow in meaning with the progress of humanity, it also limits itself with its own degradation. The definition of friendship in this field reveals itself to be a vast challenge, for it is not a simple concept, but a set of them.

When asked about the possibility of using one of today's most common means of virtual communication – Twitter – he categorically points out the tendency of this society towards the monosyllable as a form of communication, and affirms that “step by step, we go down to the grunt”<sup>3</sup>.

This blunt statement incites us to rethink the effective and affective quality of communication, as well as the veracity of the friendship relationships established within the digital space, since it is part of human

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart, already in the 1980s underlined the changes in the form of communication and its impact on relationships in the face of new technologies: “The new media have altered our patterns of communication as surely as the ice age changed the contours of the Earth”. Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart, *Inter/Media: Interpersonal Communication in a Media World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Tiffany Petricini, “Friendship in the Digital Age: Implications from a Philosophy of Communication Approach” (Doctoral diss., Duquesne University, 2020), 8-11.

<sup>3</sup> José Saramago, Interview by Prosa e Verso, *O Globo*, July 26, 2009, <http://bityli.com/n4dnnA>.

nature to constantly seek ways of relating and creating friendship bonds, but now this path is traced in a new geographical territory: the digital space.

### **1. The man who seeks**

The longing to find what one misses makes the humankind live as pilgrims – or pathfinders – who migrate from land to land, or from network to network in a digital world, in order to find something that quickly satisfies their aspirations. Currently, the Internet reveals itself as fertile ground for the cultivation and amplification of this desire, since there is no time or space limit that hinders the access to communication, whether through a connection to shorten the feeling of missing distant friends, or to expand the circles of relationships through an application. A universe that is configured in the palm of the individual's hand, or on the screen of his computer, and demands only a choice assumed before his existence or "his screen".

Faced with this reality, the human being oscillates in the paradox of these new times: he seeks freedom and, at the same time, feels lonely without technology – he lives connected, wanting to disconnect<sup>4</sup>. He presumes that he will cease to exist and will be forgotten if he doesn't stay online, based on the concept that he who is not seen, will not be remembered. Consequently, this antagonism nurtures in the individual the phobia of falling into the ostracism of a network, which at any minute has the power to erase his existence, as his timeline is not updated, which fosters the false reality of belonging, where everything is mixed up.

The Internet has become the reality of life, and real life reflects what is practiced on the networks: he who adds values and true friendships makes his network the continuation of his existence. People open to dialogue and knowledge tend to transform this medium into an environment of interaction and social engagement, aiming at interaction and

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<sup>4</sup> Xavier Guix, "O desejo de desconectar," *Jornal El País*, September 7, 2015, <http://bityli.com/sCb-coD>.

the promotion of a collective good. In contrast, alienated people make this space their own playground and dispersion from reality.

The person as an Individual<sup>5</sup> is not just a number in the crowd, because as he takes responsibility for constituting himself in his existence, he reveals himself as one who participates in the whole human race, so that humanity participates entirely in this person. His/her value does not consist in singularism, but in the openness of the relations with other members, in the proportion that each individual is able to experience, share and build up.

In a digital environment, the individual is faced with infinite possibilities, because at every moment, in a short period of time, he is offered a choice that can lead to significant changes in his way of life. Although S. Kierkegaard did not live in this digital environment, his analysis of man remains timeless: “Man is what he becomes: he makes himself, chooses himself, and exists. He is responsible for his existence, he lives infinitely interested in existing”<sup>6</sup>.

For R. Liogier, the Internet is the place of desire, and this desire is the “inseparable component of human identity”<sup>7</sup>, because every man longs to constitute and occupy a space that allows him to express and share his story. To this end, technoscience with its advances has had an impact on the construction of this narrative, by affecting this space and the way he identifies himself. “Identity scenes are spaces where our desires are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed by being there through. In the digital age, and for the first time in human history, part of identity scenes are spaces of deterritorialized desires”<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> We assume the concept of the Individual (*Enkelte*) of the thinker and theologian S. Kierkegaard, which in this topic will be fundamental for the understanding of the theme addressed, as opposed to the crowd. For the Dane, the Individual is “the decisive Christian category and will be so for the future of Christianity”. Søren A. Kierkegaard, *Ponto de vista explicativo de minha obra como escritor* (Lisboa: Edições 70, 1986), 111.

<sup>6</sup> Søren A. Kierkegaard, *Textos Seleccionados*, trans. Ernani Reichmann (Curitiba: Editora da Universidade Federal de Paraná-UFPR, 1971), 231.

<sup>7</sup> Raphaël Liogier, “Identités globales et religion à l’ère digitale: vers les Global Identity Studies,” *Social Compass* 67, no. 4 (2020): 555.

<sup>8</sup> Liogier, “Identités”, 557.

By deterritorialized space, we mean the interactive environment that is not geographically defined, which prevails as a territory of exchange, where the sharing of narratives and symbolic exchanges, videos, sounds, images, words that arouse emotions and feelings of empathy or antipathy, hate or love, exclusion or inclusion, is allowed.

In this space, multiple desires are manifested and develop independently of the places of origin and the means by which they intersect, causing the emergence of an identity or a deterritorialized existence, which does not mean being devoid of a territorial origin<sup>9</sup>.

Friendship, understood as a mere desire within these territories, is volatile, for it can arise immediately or disappear as soon as the first divergences or ideological, political and religious clashes manifest themselves. The friendship illuminated by Aristotelian thought is a leafy tree that grows slowly, because it takes time and wisdom to “taste the same salt”, that is, to endure together in the search for knowledge, to the point of being able to expose one’s own vulnerabilities, as well as to remain open to the weaknesses of the other, until finally the seed of trust emerges in both<sup>10</sup>.

Would it be consistent to build a friendship that lasts over time within a deterritorialized space? Do these spaces have the potential to provoke and transmit the affective and effective value of their communication, in the same conformity as the face-to-face encounter with the friend? Does the proportion of friends won *on-line* correspond in depth to those who have been won *off-line*?

For so many questionings, there is a wide literature with different points of view about the possibility of the digital space fostering deep friendships or not<sup>11</sup>, for this is a territory that remains in constant

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<sup>9</sup> Liogier, “Identités”, 568.

<sup>10</sup> Aristóteles, *Ética a Nicômaco*, trans. Leonel Vallandro and Gerd Bornheim from W.D. Ross’ English version (São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1973), VIII, 3, 1156b (hereafter cited as *EN*).

<sup>11</sup> Dean Cocking and Steve Matthews, “Unreal Friends,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 2, no. 4 (2000): 223-231; Michael T. McFall, “Real character-friends: Aristotelian friendship, living together, and technology,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 14, no. 3 (2012): 221-230; Barbro Fröding and Martin Peterson, “Why virtual friendship is no genuine friendship,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 14, no. 3

transformation due to the massive investment in technological improvement to offer the physical world new experiences and interactions. A certain caution is necessary in the tendency of future technologies, for their vertiginous development can cause exponential impacts on the shape of human relations that are unprotected in an immeasurable space.

It becomes increasingly clear the demand for technology aimed at meeting the aspirations of humanity within an environment that experiences constant changes, where we take as an example the mixed reality<sup>12</sup>: the user no longer needs the smartphone screen to interact intuitively with his surroundings, thanks to a technology that brings together combinations of high-definition holographic representations of people or objects, generating a hybrid process between the physical and digital world. Technology is improved in order to satisfy people's desires, but is there any tool capable of elucidating men's deepest aspirations, which remain the same in the face of a world that is constantly changing?

The friendships formed by virtual ties are usually agreed between those who have a common interest in seeking companionship and an environment of well-being, in which the relationship is guided by the individual's ability to readily meet the needs of the other, making this an alienable commodity, as Z. Bauman explains "If instant gratification is the only way to suffocate the feeling of insecurity [...] there is no obvious reason to be tolerant of anything or anyone that has no obvious relevance to the pursuit of gratification"<sup>13</sup>.

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(2012): 201-207; Adam Briggie, "Real friends: how the Internet can foster friendship," *Ethics and Information Technology* 10, no. 1 (2008): 71-79; Shannon Vallor, "Flourishing on facebook: virtue friendship & new social media," *Ethics and Information Technology* 14, no. 3 (2012): 185-199; Alexis Elder, "Excellent online friendships: an Aristotelian defense of social media," *Ethics and Information Technology* 16, no. 4 (2014): 287-297; Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe, "The Benefits of Facebook 'Friends': Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 4 (July 2007): 1143-1168; Michael-John Turp, "Social media, interpersonal relations and the objective attitude," *Ethics and Information Technology* 22 (2020): 269-279.

<sup>12</sup> This term was introduced by Paul Milgram and Fumio Kishino in their article "A taxonomy of mixed reality visual displays". Paul Milgram and Fumio Kishino, "A Taxonomy of Mixed Reality Visual Displays," *IEICE Transactions on Information and Systems* 77, no. 12 (1994): 1321-1329.

<sup>13</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernidade líquida*, trans. Plínio Dentzien (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2001), 189.

In this sense, a new social behavior is configured, whereby friendship is progressively distorted and impoverished in its meaning, as people consent to their own dilution in social networks to become part of the amount of those who expose themselves, in exchange for not falling into oblivion. They believe the sweet illusion that they are important by getting friends as often as they show themselves. They see in this environment the opportunity to express their most perfect image, and in this way, in parallel, they create their own escape route from loneliness. Yet, without realizing it, a human being can become lonely in a crowd.

R. Dunbar, in his articles<sup>14</sup>, studied the number of people with whom a human being is able to relate in a stable way, and this corresponds to approximately 150 people. So, what is the meaning of an exorbitant number of contacts stored in smartphones, or the meaning of adding five thousand friends on Facebook<sup>15</sup>?

This anthropologist attributes to “stable social relationships” the quality of friends or family members with whom human beings interact ordinarily and deeply. It takes time and care to maintain them, unlike people who are not part of one’s intimate circle and are encountered occasionally. They may be called by name, they may be greeted, and even their tastes may be known, but these attributes do not confer the intimacy necessary to name them friends.

Aristotle, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., already pointed out in his *Nicomachean Ethics* what R. Dunbar concludes about “authentic relational networks”, that the joy of a true friendship should not be linked to the number of friends acquired at the same time, because he who is friends with everyone runs the risk of being friends with no one<sup>16</sup>. For the Greek

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<sup>14</sup> Robin I. M. Dunbar, “The Anatomy of Friendship,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 22, no. 1 (2018): 32-51; Robin I. M. Dunbar, “Structure and function in human and primate social networks: implications for diffusion, network stability and health,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society A: Mathematical Physical and Engineering Sciences* 476, no. 2240 (2020): 1-26; Pádraig MacCarron, Kimmo Kaski, and Robin Dunbar, “Calling Dunbar’s numbers,” *Social Networks* 47 (2016): 151-155.

<sup>15</sup> According to its policies, the limit number of “friends” that can be added to this social network is set at five thousand. Facebook made a neologism for the word “friend” and turned the noun into a verb: *friending*, causing the feeling of familiarity.

<sup>16</sup> EN, IX, 10, 1171a 21.

philosopher and for the English anthropologist, friendship requires time and dedication, because the bonds of friendship begin to weaken as friends distance themselves from personal encounters<sup>17</sup>, as the old Portuguese proverb indicates: “out of sight, out of mind”<sup>18</sup>.

Although a significant number of friends is reached on social networks, this anthropologist’s study demonstrates that the hierarchical format of relationships on these networks follows the same pattern adopted outside them. He suggests a sharp look at the anatomy of friendship, for any communication technology is incapable of replacing the empathic process that humanity has developed throughout its history.

We are, in essence, beings open to encounter, and friendship is the bond that nurtures a community, this place where the *me* and the *you* meet to establish the value of the *we*. Even though technology is the artifice increasingly in demand to meet the most diverse needs, and, to this end, unfolds in a movement of constant change, the satisfaction of human desires still remains a great challenge.

## 2. The man who communicates

The human being carries in his essence the need to form bonds and establish relationships in order to constitute a social body. He, at his core, yearns to be a living and permanent part of a community. When Aristotle asks whether or not a man needs friends in order to be happy, he answers that friendship is an essential condition for happiness and considers absurd the possibility of a solitary man finding a good and having no one to share it with.

According to the Stagyrian, man was not born to live alone, because he is a political being (*zôon politikón*) by nature, designated to share with others, in community<sup>19</sup>. It is in his nature to wish to establish social

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<sup>17</sup> Robin Dunbar, doing a literature review of his work, presented pertinent findings about friendship in social networks during the COVID-19 impact period, where he found that “friendships require a significantly greater time investment than family relationships to maintain stability of emotional intensity.” Dunbar, “Structure”, 17.

<sup>18</sup> *EN*, VIII, 5, 1157b 12.

<sup>19</sup> Aristote, *La politique*, trans. Jules Tricot (Paris: Vrin, 1982), I, 2, 1253 a 2 and III, 6, 1278 b, 20.

bonds, even if it is necessary to abdicate part of one's own individuality, in order to experience the feeling of belonging, of welcoming and sharing elements that are common to him and that go beyond the geographical space.

Man is a being who longs to communicate (*zôon logikón*) with another who listens to him. He, unlike everything that remains closed in on itself, seeks to expand its existence in the acts of speaking and listening, of giving and receiving: "the word transforms our merely physical and passive presence into an active presence, which commits us mutually, making us social beings"<sup>20</sup>.

To this end, in his genius, this man invests heavily in the refinement of technological communication tools, which advance rapidly, in order to achieve an infinity of possibilities that promote the encounter with the other. The Internet already stands out as an indispensable tool for today's communication, for its ability to overcome the physical obstacles imposed by distance, revealing itself to be one of the greatest technological phenomena of this generation.

With the progress of new media, the public has gained significant independence from the restrictions established by traditional means of communication, obtaining as a benefit a greater volume and greater diversity of information sources. On the other hand, man does not have enough time for himself, nor does he have adequate skills to process and discern on the effective value of the quality and veracity of the information that reaches him daily. This new environment is a comfort to the users who are educated and qualified to analyze and critically distinguish the content of each material, but what is the fate of those who have been seduced by the *panem et circenses* life model?

The latest statistical studies on digital media reveal that individuals increasingly view countless windows simultaneously, as well as alternate social platforms at an unthinkable speed. Emotional instability and anxiety reveal themselves as a remarkable aspect in the behavior of

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<sup>20</sup> Lino Rampazzo, *Antropologia: religiões e valores cristãos* (São Paulo: Paulus, 2014), 240.

this generation, showing the unfolding of a new form of relationship with time, where the quality of a connection is valued by the speed of response, and friendships are recognized by the amount of likes and shares<sup>21</sup>.

This is a society marked by a practically symbiotic interaction with their cell phones, since, as soon as they wake up, individuals automatically direct their first glance to the screen of their smartphones, eager for the latest notifications, just as, at the end of the day, they fall asleep only after viewing it as a last movement.

The speed of human life and the potential of digital devices to adapt in an apparently natural way to the human body make them assume the profile as an extension of their own constitution: when seeing a landscape or any attractive image, the human being chooses first to register it under the spectrum of a smartphone screen, with the automatic intention of posting it on his or her social network, and ends up leaving behind the gaze itself, which has a lens with an infinitely wider-angle view and the simultaneous power to register all the feeling in the soul, something that the rectangular limit of a screen will never offer.

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<sup>21</sup> Lori Lewis, for some time, has been doing some statistical research on the population's actions on the Internet: Lori Lewis, "What Happens In An Internet Minute 2021," *Infographic*, 2021, <http://bityli.com/SGJhPu>. The latest Digital Report, October 2021, published in partnership with We Are Social and Hootsuite, contains significant relevance, as the data presented denote that connected technology has taken on an even more essential part in people's lives. During the year 2019, mainly due to the impact of COVID-19, social media, e-commerce, streaming content, and video games have seen voluminous growth. Data from their report shows that 4.88 billion (61.8%) people are already Internet users, generating an increase of 222 million (4.8%) compared to October 2020 data. In 2022, the average usage time equaled approximately 7 hours a day on the Internet with all devices, which corresponds to almost 48 hours a week online, which corresponds to spending 40% of their waking life online. Worldwide, there are 4.62 billion social media users, that is 58.4% of the total population. This number has grown steeply by 192 million over the past 12 months, generating a percentage increase of approximately 4%. However, older age groups are the fastest growing segments on social platforms. Facebook has seen a rise of around 25% of users over the age of 65 compared to the year 2020, which is almost double the overall average of 13%. The October 2021 report shows that the average time a user spends on social media is close to 2 hours and 27 minutes. This latest report also shows the main reasons for accessing the Internet: in first place, the search for information (60.5%), followed by the interest in keeping in touch with family and friends (54.7%), and lastly is the interest in meeting new people (29.9%). DataReportal, "Digital 2022: Global Overview Report"; "Digital 2022: Global Digital October Global Statshot", <http://bityli.com/n22aY6>.

These relationships have been gradually building a kind of subliminal contract, which slyly demands the individual's continuous and attentive permanence in the online regime, so that he always responds promptly to all requests and inquiries. The clicks of the Internet, according to E. Brum, have become the oars of the old galleys: "Row, row, row. Click, click, click not to be left behind and die"<sup>22</sup>.

The lack or delay of a response is capable of generating anxiety in the expectant, or even misinterpretations about this form of absence. Then, worried about meeting all these expectations, the human being rushes his existence so fast that he forgets to live, "achieving the unprecedented feat of being master and slave at the same time"<sup>23</sup>.

Would it be possible, then, to build in this space relationships capable of ennobling and deepening bonds of sincerity, intimacy, and friendship among people who freely identify and associate with each other? What can friendship in the light of the mystery of Christ illuminate and contribute to a reflection within this new territory?

### 3. Friendship as "*culmen et fons*"

In the Council document *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church not only communicates divine life to humanity, but also elevates the dignity of the human person, and strengthens the cohesion of society by offering a profound meaning to the daily activity of men and women<sup>24</sup>.

In considering the hermeneutical movement proper to the living Tradition of the Church in its current context, the thought of Pope Francis shows great interest in promoting processes of renewal of Christian

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<sup>22</sup> Eliane Brum, "Exaustos-e-correndo-e-dopados," *Jornal El País*, July 4, 2016, <http://bityli.com/eCL8dD>.

<sup>23</sup> Brum, "Exaustos".

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Concílio Vaticano II, "Constituição Pastoral *Gaudium e Spes*," in *Documentos do Concílio Ecumênico Vaticano II* (São Paulo: Paulus, 2014), sec. 40 (hereafter cited as GS).

life, without ignoring the spirituality and liturgical praxis<sup>25</sup>. This proposal from the Supreme Pontiff is expressed in terms of new paradigms that provide efficacy for human relationships, based on evangelical coherence. Rescuing a theology of friendship within the celebratory sphere, as *culmen et fons*<sup>26</sup>, can contribute in a relevant way to the renewal of the Christian community.

However, it is essential to remind Christians of their sources and make them discover in the celebration of faith the nourishment of spiritual life, because every sacrament celebrated and in every mystery experienced, it is configured that liturgy that does not represent a mere reflection of an abstract Church, but reveals a community that from the beginning supports and urges every Christian to become the bearer and transmitter of the mystery that is greater than himself.

Therefore, this encounter should not be understood as a simple and optional way in which each Christian makes his choice to experience it or not, but as a *sine qua non* condition for those who truly want to be friends with Christ. He is the reference of friendship<sup>27</sup>, in which servility between master and disciple no longer fits. Christ offers us a new relationship of coexistence, where love, reciprocity, and trust are the elements responsible for propelling, sedimenting, and generating a new community, and freedom and familiarity are expressions proper to friends of God, who accept the invitation to live the new Covenant.

When authentic Christian *philia* becomes incapable of being part of community life, its members begin to face the same loneliness that afflicts any human being, and from there they allow themselves to be

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<sup>25</sup> In the period from November 2017 to April 2018, Pope Francis over the course of fifteen catechesis explained the importance of the Holy Mass, stopping to teach the parts that make it up and its relevance in the life of the Christian. "Through these", the Holy Father said, "I wanted to rediscover with you the beauty that is hidden in the Eucharistic celebration, and which, once revealed, gives full meaning to each person's life". Francisco, PP., "Audiência Geral de 8 de novembro de 2017", <http://bit.ly/2uYa3vh>.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Concílio Vaticano II, "Constituição *Sacrosanctum Concilium*," in *Documentos do Concílio Vaticano II: constituições, decretos, declarações* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1966), sec. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Jn 15:15.

succumbed by the same appeals promoted by social networks. Friendship depends on the permanent care of love between friends, which by its constant practice becomes a virtuous way of living, because in love we learn by loving and by loving we learn about friendship.

The theme of Christian friendship in the digital environment must be highlighted, because social networks are inevitably part of the daily life of a good number of Christians. They establish new dynamics of communication, and the Church cannot remain oblivious to this reality, as these communities also seek to form their relationship networks. It is up to the Church to signal that the spirit of a community of faith should not be inclined to particularism nor to the growth of short-term relationships.

Christian communities in this environment must understand to witness among themselves and to others that it is not just a matter of network or group choice, but of building and shaping an identity grounded in stability and commitment to Truth. Since liturgy is a constituent part of life because it is dynamic, symbolic, and performative<sup>28</sup>, it precedes us as an offering, natural to every man's longing for union.

By neglecting the motive of the celebration, we neglect the centrality of liturgical prayer which is to express communally the advent of the Word – Christ – who enters the community that celebrates Him. Without the space and the concrete time, there is no celebration. Without the body, there is no relationship. And without the community, there is no participation – because it is possible to “celebrate the liturgy for an entire existence, without, however, living from this celebrated liturgy”<sup>29</sup>.

The Liturgy is the privileged *locus* where the invitation to a continuous deepening of friendship with God is born, and the gathered community experiences the encounter. Christians are invited to give their “yes”

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<sup>28</sup> “In the community of faith, a celebration is not created, it is rather offered, it emerges naturally.” Cf. Bishop Raúl Berzosa, “Evangelizar Comunicando en una Nueva Cultura Tecnoliquida,” *Vida Nueva* (2015), 28.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Goffredo Boseli, *O sentido da Liturgia* (Brasília: CNBB, 2014), 8-9.

to the proposal of adventure that Christ offers them in every liturgical celebration, to form a community that no longer celebrates itself, but the history of which it is a part and allows to be transformed.

### **Final considerations**

Faced with the vulnerability of this new format for building human relationships, a reflection on the relevance of Christian friendship in the digital environment becomes indispensable, in view of the inevitable permanence of social networks in the daily life of a good part of Christians. They establish new dynamics of communication, and the Church must not remain oblivious to this reality, since these communities are also already part of some digital form of relationship. Thus, the Church has the fundamental role of signaling and educating its faithful to maintain the spirit of a community of faith, which should not tend toward particularism and the growth of short-term relationships, but should always be ready to welcome every “foreigner” who knocks at its door, including the one who now arrives through virtual paths.

The Christian community in this environment must understand to witness among itself and to everyone, that its presence in the digital space does not aim at a mere choice of network or group, but at the construction and formation of an identity grounded by hospitality and by the commitment to evangelical coherence, since the natural longing of every man for union must be part of the dynamism of every Christian.

Faced with this new scenario, the Liturgy must not waste the opportunity to transform the digital space into a privileged *locus* of encounter, as it turns it into an invitation to a continuous deepening of friendship with God. If today’s man believes in the veracity of the encounter in the virtual world with the stranger who knocks on his “digital profile”, without questioning the way this happens, why not accept the proposal of adventure that Christ offers in every liturgical celebration to form a community that no longer celebrates itself, but the history of which it is part and allows to be transformed? It is the story of hope that animates and represents it: a community of friends is the privileged place to have

an experience of pastoral conversion<sup>30</sup>, as well as the discernment of the signs of the times that are scrutinized in everyday life<sup>31</sup>.

Digital space does not yet offer alternatives for the realization of a sacramental experience, because for the liturgical rite, relational realism is essential, which connects to a physical condition and involves the participants and the elements that constitute it<sup>32</sup>.

In contrast, digital media can be fertile ground for Christians who wish to pray together and share their faith, in the face of the impossibility of physical presence, where this simple tool has the ability to provide an experience of evangelization.

For A. Spadaro, technology reveals man's longing for a plenitude that goes beyond the present and relational spaces, as well as the sphere of knowledge. It is in this dynamic space that human finitude is revealed: "To search for it means, in a certain way, to operate in a field where spirituality and technology intersect"<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Francisco, PP, *Exortação Apostólica Evangelii Gaudium* (Prior Velho: Paulinas, 2014), sec. 25, 27 and 32.

<sup>31</sup> GS, sec. 4 and 11.

<sup>32</sup> Conselho Pontifício para as Comunicações Sociais, "Igreja e Internet," 9.

<sup>33</sup> Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 11.

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