THE CHRISTIAN "YES"
AND THE DEFEAT OF NIHILISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Decline and Malaise

There seems to be a common consensus that despite the awesome "progress" made since the beginning of the digital age there are key "features of our contemporary culture and society that people experience as a loss or a decline, even as our contemporary culture 'develops'."[1] The impetus for these changes, what Taylor describes as "expressive individualism", is a product of the Romantic nineteenth century when the intellectual and artistic elite sought a more "authentic way of living or expressing themselves" in the reason-focused worldview following the Enlightenment and French Revolution and the nihilism it fostered. The difference of the present period, according to Taylor, is that the individualism expresses itself as a "self-orientation" which "seems to have become a mass phenomenon."[2] The contributing factors to this phenomenon are many: widespread affluence contributing to a consumer lifestyle; increased social and

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[1] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 1.

[2] Ibid.

geographic mobility; foreign outsourcing and domestic downsizing by major

corporations; new family patterns; the growth of suburbia; and digital technology.[3] In

America, there is the sense that "communities are eroding, families, neighborhoods, even

the polity;" we have begun to feel as though our neighbors have lost interest in us, and we

in them, and that we are less willing to participate in the community and are less trusting

of those around us.

A closer look at the perceived cultural malaise will shed light, as well, on the

decline that precedes it. When asked what is the most frequent cause of anguish in his

patients, the philosopher and psychoanalyst Umberto Galimberti replied, "[The anguish]

provoked by nihilism. Young people today are not well, but they don't even understand

why. They lack purpose. For them, the future has changed from promising to

threatening." He adds, "…When I began working as a psychoanalyst, the problems were

grounded in emotions, feelings, and sexuality. Now they concern the void of meaning."[4]

That life has no meaning, that I have inherited nothing and must create the future, is the

core of the nihilistic worldview. Professor Galimberti cautions that "what's at stake is so

important that we must not try to minimize it…Our experience of living is called into

question."[5]

For a concrete look into this situation, let us consider the experience of Romano

Guardini returning for a visit to his childhood home in Lake Como in northern Italy from

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[3] cf. Ibid.

[4] In Julián Carrón, "'Who is This Man?': Beginning Day of the Adults and University Students of Communion and Liberation," *Traces*, October 2019, 2.

[5] Ibid.

his home in Germany. *"Do you think of the afternoon on the edge of the forest where the buzzards had their nest? They glided off into the blue distance…In the far distance the mountain ranges rose up in clear outline, and behind them the land that I had not seen for twenty years was waiting…I cannot find a way to express how human this nature is and how we feel in it the possibility of being human."*[6] In his characteristic clarity, Guardini paints the picture of his beloved Lake Como with a nostalgic reckoning. His life in mid-20th century Germany had become surrounded by death, a slide toward the nonhuman; everything was concrete and grey, without color; he compares his experience of returning to Italy to being "in the middle of wave. It is everywhere breaking and rolling and sinking and rising again."[7] The beauty of Italy that he remembers, the integration of the house tops leading, one after the other, to the rising steeple of the church at the center of town was slowly giving way to something he describes as "death overtaking a life of infinite beauty."[8] In the midst of the peacefulness, of "the singing lines of a small town, I saw the great box of a factory…[I]n a landscape in which all the risings and fallings and measures and proportions came together in one clear melody, along with the lofty bell tower there was suddenly a smokestack, and everything fell apart."[9] Guardini was witnessing a life of integration, a symphonic melody that breathed

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[6] Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como: Explorations in Technology and the Human Race* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 3-4.

[7] Ibid., 4.

[8] Ibid., 5.

[9] Ibid., 6-7.

life into humanity, give way to "a world that is in some way nonhuman."[10] The arrival of certain forms of technology into Lake Como began to undo the very sources from which Guardini learned what it means to be human and that gave a certain sense of order and meaning to his adolescence.

If we look at the trajectory of the development of technology from the very beginning of the human race, in its most primitive form, until the beginning of the digital age - from the invention of stone tools and the discovery of fire, to the various stages and forms of clothing, shelter, energy, transportation, and communication - there is one very important common trait: the technology was invented by humans for the making-easier or more convenient the various tasks and projects of human life. Now, however, digital technology has begun to grow at a rate exponentially faster than any other form of technology, and is advancing faster than the humans who invented it can understand it. With the introduction of artificial intelligence in its various forms, technology has taken on something of a life of its own which means that for the first time in history, humans are not the smartest or most advanced things on the planet. What was created for himself has now escaped from his control and, in some sense, controls him.[11]

Digital technology now connects us with any corner of the world at any time, and this is part of what Galimberti means when he says that our whole experience of living is being called into question. There is no longer congruence between generations, and one's

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[10] Ibid., 7.

[11] cf. Christopher Dawson, "Christian Culture as a Culture of Hope," in *Christianity and European Culture (Selections from the Work of Christopher Dawson)*, ed. Gerald J. Russello (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1998), 53.

connection to a given plot of land and community of people, once foundational elements of human flourishing, is no longer seen as essential. Members of the Greatest Generation, my grandparents, have a completely different vision and expectation of life than millennials; differences in this range are normal. But consider that my friends and I in our late 20s have a completely different worldview in terms of politics, religion, and what constitutes "the good life", as well as a different way of interacting with digital technology than recent high school graduates and students in my parish grade school. Those who are, at most, ten years younger than me are doing things with their phones that I have never heard of and need their help to do.

The communities that used to define us now exist almost entirely online and entirely on-demand. The diverse town square has been replaced by an ideologically-tailored newsfeed. The intimate conversations between lovers begins with one "sliding into" the other's direct message inbox, is kindled with pictures of half of one's face on Snapchat, and often culminates with lengthy FaceTime calls in which it doesn't matter how much one thinks he is staring into the eyes of his soul mate because the reality is that he is looking into nothing; he stares deeply into a Liquid Crystal Display illuminated by an LED backlight projecting images received by a camera lens attached to a device in the hand of some other human, who may as well be 1000 miles away. While these moments might still produce real relationships, and certainly can be a supplement for people in any type of relationship to remain in touch with one another and actually foster deeper communion, more and more this type of digital relationship is replacing real human interaction. And when I get tired of the person? When I'm ready to move on to someone

more beautiful and interesting? I ghost you; I leave you on read, I block you from my profile, and it's like you never existed.

Here we are able to hear a familiar cry against digital technology, mostly from our grandmothers but increasingly from users of the technology themselves: people today are more self-oriented than ever, and are using the world and each other only for their own success. This is the heart of the nihilism described by Professor Galimberti. There is no longer meaning to my life because the things that once gave it meaning - community, God, and undiluted personal interactions - no longer exist. Therefore, I am left to create my own life, my own identity, my own success. The nihilism of the digital age fosters intense individualism, and the individualism only reinforces nihilism. This predicament, says Charles Taylor, has been "discussed, bemoaned, challenged, and argued…all the time in all sorts of media. That sounds like a reason not to talk about [it] further. But I believe that this great familiarity hides bewilderment, that we don't really understand these changes that worry us."[12] We are working with a new understanding of "human life, agency, and the good" which seem to "encourage this new…individuation, and almost make us morally uneasy about it."[13]

It seems we have lost a heroic dimension of life which tells me that my identity comes from outside of me, is something given to me and which can never be taken away. This was the dimension that told me that who I am and what I do has meaning, and what I contribute is unique and necessary. So, yes, in the developed civilization we have rights

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[12] Taylor, *Ethics*, 2.

[13] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 474.

and privileges that ages before us never knew, and of course these are good. But if

everyone around me is just "raw material" for me to create my own life, we have lost the

essential ingredient of the democratic age: "E Pluribus Unum," from the many, one.

Fulfillment is no longer found in the common flourishing, but instead in what Alexis de

Tocqueville called "les petits et vulgaires plaisirs"[14] small and vulgar pleasures of life.

Nihilistic individualism draws the human toward himself, "and threatens to finally shut

him up inside the solitude of his own heart."[15] Such a situation which both "flattens and

narrows our lives" and leads to an "abnormal and regrettable self-absorption."[16]

Researchers discovered that Millennial teens in the 2000s, who came of age before the

strongest onset of digital technology, reported that the individualism they felt fostered

"freedom and optimism", but as the digital age and its technology evolved, teens of the

same age growing up in the 2010s reported feeling "left out and lonely."[17] They said they

suffered from FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), telling researchers that they were unsatisfied

with themselves as people and with the state of their lives in general, causing them to turn

toward the self-absorption of which Taylor speaks; the conclusion of this study is telling:

"as teens spent less time with their friends in person and more time on their phones, their

life satisfaction dropped with astonishing speed."[18] This state of affairs was inherited by

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[14] Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1981), 385.

[15] Ibid., 127. "…et menace de le renfermer enfin tout entier dans la solitude de son propre coeur."

[16] Taylor, *Ethics*, 4.

[17] Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy - and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood, and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria, 2017), 95-96.

[18] Ibid.

the digital age, so we cannot place the blame for this way of living on digital technology alone, as if the nihilism which plagues us has not been in gestation for centuries; but it seems that digital technology, which is ubiquitously available and terribly addictive, is simply fresh meat for a very hungry beast.

Technology and Communion

The toppling of the modes and orders of life that once gave us meaning has developed into a very dangerous sense of nihilism and that in the younger generations now coming of age digital technology is seen as both a respite from a meaningless life and as a way to manufacture meaning. This combination has caused modern men and women to view the people and circumstances around them as mere "raw materials", to use Charles Taylor's phrase, when this technology is left to its own devices. When viewed from the standpoint of the Catholic worldview, the problems caused by the nihilistic individualism of the digital age become clearer. The problem in focus in this talk concerns an essential aspect of the Catholic worldview, namely its emphasis on a transformative communion. This communion with God, with myself, and with others fosters authenticity and abundance of life.

Let us devote some serious attention to exploring the relationship between digital technology and communion, because it is this central aspect of the Christian life that is most eroded by technology. It's dishonest to pretend that digital technology does not help foster some degree of connection.

Parents and children feel more secure and remain more connected than ever; from my office in the rectory, I am able to check in on my mother shovel the driveway of my boyhood home via her Ring doorbell app.

Likewise, the modes of conducting education, business, medicine, and scholarship have changed for the better. Much of this essay was written using resources available on databases like J-STOR and was written remotely, far from any academic library; this is a task that was impossible until only recently. Now, even the "most isolated outpost" has become "a center of learning and economic activity."[19]

As our identities develop over time, we can find resources in an instant that will help us "rework unresolved issues and seek out missed experiences."[20] On a grand scale, there is much that has been given to us by digital technology for which we should be grateful.

On a smaller scale, however, these grand innovations bring "compulsions" that often take us by surprise.[21] In preparation for this talk, I asked the Chesterton seniors (whose theology class I teach) to submit anonymously their reflections on social media. Do they have it? Do they like it? What has their experience been? I was so edified by their responses, the bulk of which I will share a bit later. For now, listen to this reflection from one of them:

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[19] Sherry Turkel, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 152.

[20] Ibid., 153.

[21] Ibid., 154.

> The "social" part of social media really can be sort of ironic. From waiting around at a store to the sports locker rooms to just going for a walk around any given town, I find it rare when there are people who aren't glued to their electronic device in front of them. Your screen is a door to your own universe where once inside you can shut out the world around you, and I've noticed that people tend to hide their insecurities by scrolling. And scrolling. And scrolling some more.

How many of us can tell stories like this? When I was in the seminary, I put my phone on airplane mode and plugged it in across my bedroom and away from my bed, thereby alleviating the temptation to endlessly scroll through snippets of what Allen Bloom calls the "half digested…distillations" of the American mind,[22] also known as "Twitter." Now, as a parish priest, because of the way our emergency notification system is set up, and because we must be on-call twenty-four hours a day, my phone now sits next to my bed, alive and well with the ringer and WiFi fully operational, all night, every night. One more good night's sleep thwarted by scrolling or by turning over at 2am and remembering an email I need to send may just be the death of me. As I mature in my priesthood I have had to take serious steps to scale back and prevent these temptations. Perhaps the biggest downfall of the way we're using digital technology is also the most lamented, namely the degeneration of connection and what it means to exist, live, love, and grow together.

Connection, the initial means of true communion, is essential for the Christian life and the fullness of that life is impossible without it. What is meant to help us begins to take over; what is meant to be a part of life becomes a way of life most of us are not ready to live.[23] An honest look into one's own life reveals that at times technology seeps

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[22] Allen Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 227.

[23] Turkel, *Alone Together*, 153.

into places it shouldn't, or at least that we don't mean it to, and limits this essential

connection; but does it have to?

The Essence of Technology

What is the essence of technology? Let's focus for a moment on this question,

especially as it relates to the concept of connecting with ourselves, others, and ultimately

with God. Our starting point for these thoughts comes from an unlikely source, namely

the twentieth century philosopher Martin Heidegger. His thought and person are both

deeply divisive, and given that he was a literal Nazi, we are hard-pressed to accept

everything that he stood for. His writings on technology, however, are important and

illuminating. In his two landmark works on this topic, first in the 1949 Bremen Lectures

and then in his 1954 essay, "The Question Concerning Technology", Heidegger "draws

attention to technology's place in bringing about our decline by constructing our

experience of things as they are."[24] In other words, technology today causes us to view

the person and nature as a whole only technologically, through the lens of instrumental

reason and only as "raw material for technical operations."[25] Humans are living in

bondage not only to personal devices, but to a technologized worldview, the escape from

which, Heidegger argues, will not be found in the rejection of technology altogether but

instead in the person's ability to perceive its danger and to go about life in a different

way, a way which corresponds more faithfully to reality as it actually presents itself, and

not as we construct it.

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[24] Mark Blitz, "Understanding Heidegger on Technology," *The New Atlantis* 41 (Winter 2014), 1.

[25] Ibid.

Heidegger thinks technology is capable of fostering encounters with the broader world, and he sees the "essence of technology as a way in which we encounter entities generally, including nature, ourselves, and everything."[26] We are seeing, however, that just because technology fosters encounters between entities, and that because of these encounters "all distances in time and space are shrinking," this does not mean that the two entities encountering one another are brought closer in any meaningful way; Heidegger clarifies that "the hasty setting aside of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in a small amount of distance."[27] In fact, as in the case of digital technology, the nearness we crave can even be "warded off by the restless removal of distances" such that modern man is "almost incapable of experiencing…nearness."[28]

In *Alone Together*, Sherri Turkel has a section entitled, "The New State of the Self: Tethered and Marked Absent."[29] She writes that in our age, "being connected depends not on our distance from each other" but on what communications technologies are available to us.[30] Since we mainly communicate with loved ones through these technologies, the people who are present with us in person are often invisible and ignored, no longer agents of communion but hindrances to it; in fact, Turkel writes,

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[26] Ibid., 5.

[27] Martin Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 2012), 3.

[28] Blitz, "Understanding Heidegger," 5.

[29] cf. Turkel, *Alone Together*, 155.

[30] Ibid.

"being alone can start to seem like a precondition for being together."[31] Places that once served as communal spaces where the peoples of the world would meet each other, like train stations and airports, are now places of mere "social collection"; and "social collection" is not even closely akin to communion of persons. I once watched a video on a popular app of a middle-age woman giving tips on ways to avoid someone sitting next to you on Southwest Airlines flights. She suggested claiming the window seat for yourself, putting down the middle seat's tray table and putting your own beverage there, and then looking down while pretending to rummage through your bag, making believe that the people who are interested in that seat simply aren't there.

We are living in a world full of people who treat the other humans hurling through the cosmos with them as if they were not even there, ironically in order to create the right environment for their own forms of connection. Sherry Turkel makes a very helpful clarification. Perhaps it is not the rest of us being treated as if we are not there, but maybe it is the other way around: "it is those on the phone who mark themselves absent" from the rest of us.[32] People signal their departure from us in overt ways - pretending to be talking on the phone when there's no one there, for example - but often this happens in less conspicuous ways - "there may be a glance down at a mobile device during dinner."[33] To sit across from someone, perhaps someone whom we love deeply, who prioritizes the digital activity in their pocket over making eye contact with us, who are really there, is a

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Turkel, *Alone Together*, 155.

[33] Ibid.

trauma of our age. One Chesterton senior noted the awkward experience of noticing

people say things on Instagram or via text that they would never say in real life. Think of

the familiar experience of walking into a crowded coffee shop, where almost everyone is

on a smartphone or computer as they drink their coffee; Turkel shares, "These people are

not my friends, yet somehow I miss their presence."[34]

These forms of digital technology began as a means to share practical information

and communicate more efficiently and have transformed into primarily technologies of

relationship.[35] But in order to invest in these "relationships", we are foregoing the age-

old, time-tested methods of living together, and at what price? Many people are leaving

behind their religious and civic connections that bound us together for centuries; while

Boomers mock Millennials for living with their parents into their 30s, the truth is that a

high number of millennials are leaving father and mother, letting go of physical

connections, in order to create their own stories.[36] There is no time for dating or children,

because these are not forms of convenient companionship compatible with the life I must

create for myself. The dream today, on the one hand, is to never be alone, but to always

be companioned on my terms, in my way, to meet my needs; the dream today is "to be

never alone but, [also], always in control." This kind of say-so in the nature and quality of

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[34] Ibid., 156.

[35] Turkel, 157.

[36] Ibid.

our relationships can't happen when one is face-to-face with the dynamic presence of another person.[37]

A life of scrolling, editing, filtering, and posting in hopes of fostering communion produces anxiety, loneliness, and shame, and the convenience of digital technology means that we will cope with these feelings by more scrolling, editing, filtering, and posting. It is clear that something dangerous is happening to our ability to be together as human persons and to experience true companionship with those present before us. And if we cannot experience true, transformative companionship with those right in front of us, how can we as Christians expect to remain in love with a Spirit until we are dead, whose face we have never seen?

The Deepest Desires and the Fundamental Yes

Over Thanksgiving break one year, my older brother convinced me to download the popular app "Tik Tok", the mega-popular lovechild of two former apps: Vine, which allowed users to post seven-second videos, and Musical.ly, which allowed users to post videos of themselves lip-syncing to popular songs. Users on Tik Tok can post pretty much anything they want, in hopes of getting "clout" and going viral. One popular user, who goes by the handle "placebo3ff3ct2", has 9.2 millions likes and almost 300,000 followers. One day, I noticed instead of a video he posted this paragraph:

> Hey y'all. I know it's only been a couple day break but I'm planning on not posting much during the school week then posting a lot on weekends. I'll only be a little active in the comments. I'm just trying to distance myself from Tik Tok. I don't want to worry about likes or views or followers anymore. I want to be able to enjoy my life and not have it revolve around Tik Tok. I've been getting a lot of

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[37] Ibid.

hate recently and ngl[38] it's been really hard to handle. All these factors have caused me to hate Tik Tok. Hope you understand.[39]

The desire to be liked, to be known, to be welcomed, to be seen and heard…these are the yearnings of the human heart. What is one thing that every person in this room has in common? Something that every person in our school community has in common? When we switch off the light at night, and swing our legs under the blanket and they are alone, perhaps for the first time all day, with the thoughts of their mind and movements of their heart, the questions each of them ask are the same: who am I? Why is it that I am what I am? Where am I going? Who will go with me?[40]

Must technology, by its essence, hinder the human person as he or she grapples with these basic questions of life? Even Heidegger says no. He writes that it is not the case "that technology is the fate of our age, where 'fate' means the inevitableness of an unalterable course."[41] Instead, he argues, man must have the courage to say "yes" to technology, to question technology, in order to "prepare a free relationship with technology."[42] In *Letters from Lake Como,* Guardini also advocates this "yes" to the culture, but not in a blanket way. The answer lies in making a fundamental yes to the time, place, and age in which we find ourselves; it is a yes to the culture in the broadest possible sense without becoming an affirmation of everything the culture proposes.

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[38] "Not gonna lie."

[39] Sayer Keeley (@placebo3ff3ct2), Tik Tok video, 17 November 2019, https://vm.tiktok.com/V5Ujgm.

[40] cf. Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship* (San Fransisco: Ignatius, 2005), 222.

[41] Blitz, "Understanding Heidegger," 11.

[42] Ibid.

The one who remains close to Christ recognizes him in every historical age and circumstance. The Christian's "yes" is a decisive yes, which is rooted in a knowing heart. It is a heart that knows the living Christ who is present to every age, and a heart that is convinced that what is evolving before us in terms of culture is not simply another "variation on a common theme" but is "something historically new."[43] The defeat of nihilism is not found in a wholesale rejection of the current cultural situation simply because it is new or the things it is proposing are both nonhuman and unChristian. It is counter productive to "oppose what is new and try to preserve a beautiful world that is inevitably perishing….Rather, [by our yes to it] we must transform what is coming to be." The one who remains close to Christ possesses a knowing and "incorruptible heart" and is able to say yes to what is historically new and yet "remain aware of all that is destructive and nonhuman in it."[44]

Remaining close to Christ means allowing him to become the center and the protagonist of our whole history; it is to be taken over, in every way a person can be taken over, by the gaze of Christ which convinces and heals. We meet people in whom Jesus is living, radically and truly living, and we say, "Who are you, that you look at me this way?"[45] Then, we meet him and we ourselves are changed, so much so that people encounter us and ask, "You have a different gaze: you're more yourself. What happened

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[43] Guardini, *Lake Como*, 80.

[44] Ibid., 80-81.

[45] Carrón, "Who is This Man?", 12.

to you?"[46] People walk away from us saying "You know, when I'm with you, I'm not

afraid anymore. I see the possibility of a life with hope, a life in which I might give and

receive real love, and maybe even the kind of love that could convince me that God exists

in my life and is present now, just as he promised."[47] We remain close to Christ by

choosing to say yes to him wherever he is found and choosing to invite him wherever he

has not yet been allowed to go. By participation in the one body of Christ, and through

sacramental transformation, the Spirit of Jesus finds in us a "remnant of glory, an icon of

[Christ]: ceaselessly loved…[Such that] each of us can whisper' …I remain the image of

your inexpressible glory, even though I am wounded!'"[48] And in coming to full

knowledge of this truth, we can exclaim:

> Jesus, you call my name. / You call me by a name never spoken before and never to be uttered again. / My real name. / Let me live, O Lord, by faith - near blind, near deaf / straining the ear of earth to hear the echo of my name / in gifted speech of hinted truth… / child, beloved, likeness, your glory, / your glory.[49]

In our nihilist age, "we wander astray like orphans…All burdens are laid upon us,

and we are slaves as long as we are not surrendered to him who is freedom and grace."[50]

The "yes" to Christ who is the truth (cf. Jn. 14:6) is the means by which the digital age

will find its root in the earliest meaning of the word *techne*, from which technology

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46 Ibid.

47 Helen Alvaré, "Day 4 Keynotes," filmed at SLS20 for FOCUS, Phoenix, AZ, video, 23:43, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_MHXfk.

48 Corbon, *Wellspring*, 223.

49 John Janaro, "Be Opened," *Magnificat*, February 2018, 129.

50 Corbon, *Wellspring,* 223.

derives: the "bringing forth of the true into the beautiful."[51] The "yes" to Christ brings us face to face with a presence that can obtain from us what no one and nothing else can: a living presence, which invites me to share in its own beautiful life, and thereby fosters in me "adherence, affection, and love without compare."[52]

The fundamental question for the every person, until the end of history; the greatest question a human can imagine for his freedom is this: Christ: yes or no? A "yes" to this question is the only thing that can conquer nihilism and set us free.

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[51] Blitz, "Understanding Heidegger," 11.

[52] Carrón, "Who is This Man?", 12.