

A missionary community in the digital age: the challenge of techno-capitalism

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1. The Context: Techno-Capitalism

The most significant technological transformation in recent decades is undoubtedly the Internet. Its rapid global spread has revolutionized our way of communicating, informing ourselves, relating, consuming, and working. Thirty years after its birth, however, we are now aware that the inspiring ideals of Tim Berners-Lee—a web in service of the common good, an instrument of liberation, shared knowledge, and democratic participation—can be easily distorted and turned into tools of oppression, falsehood, and manipulation.

Neoliberalism today presents itself as the sole economic paradigm, imposing homogeneous rules for interpreting social interactions. It has adapted with surprising speed to technological changes, bending ethical principles—which in their origin were driven by a genuine desire to build community—to its own advantage. The anthropologist and digital culture expert Remedios Zafra defines this symbiosis between capitalism and technology as "techno-capitalism." Her main concern is that capitalism, by nature uninterested in the moral dimension of human relationships, seeks only economic profit. Thus, there is no attention paid to the common good or to the construction of a collective ethic that improves society.

We are witnessing a capitalism that has reinvented itself by exploiting the new possibilities of the online world. Its ultra-segmented advertising campaigns do not merely respond to needs but anticipate and construct desires, fueling consumerism. The human being is reduced to a commodity: both a consumer and a producer of data, becoming yet another node in the network. The techno-capitalist system, however, does not attribute the same value to everyone. It discards those who are not productive: the elderly, differently abled, the poor. This is the "throwaway culture," denounced repeatedly by Pope Francis, which reduces a person to a performance index. An economy that excludes, devoid of a human face, is doomed to failure.

Social networks, born with the promise of connecting us and creating open, plural, and democratic communities, transform the user into a data producer and a compulsory consumer of advertising. In return, they offer generous metrics to feed their ego. We pay above all with our time, dazed by the "infinite scroll" that many platforms have introduced as a central feature. Time, that immaterial resource that says much about who we are and our priorities, is fragmented and dispersed in a continuous demand for attention. And we are not immune to this force.

There is a strong link between neoliberalism and individualism. Since one of the pillars of capitalism is consumption, the individual becomes first and foremost a consumer. In the web paradigm, they are also a "prosumer," i.e., someone who consumes and simultaneously produces information—in most cases, simply data. Thus, their primary "contribution" to the system becomes the consumption of data and advertising. Productivity is reduced to the capacity to generate views to attract advertising, in an endless cycle of likes, hearts, and shares. An inflated view of the self is reinforced, based on personal reputation, possession, and immediate

gratification. On the contrary, identities based on generosity, care, selfless relationships and the building of communities based on shared interests are being weakened.

Another element fueling individualism is competitiveness: an excessive focus on personal success at the expense of collaborative dynamics. This leads to the belief that everyone gets what they deserve and that success or failure are purely individual, ignoring the complexity of the factors at play. Thus, the sense of shared responsibility, that social dimension essential for our human and spiritual growth, is lost.

Digital platforms should open us up to the plurality and diversity of reality; instead, by analyzing our personal choices, they reinforce forms of communication increasingly similar to our tastes, preventing encounters with the different. One of the great victims of the internet is truth: everyone seems to construct their own, defending it with arguments taken from the web, even for the most bizarre opinions. For a Christian, truth exists, it is one and has a name (Jn 14:6). No one possesses it: we are called to walk towards it with humility, allowing ourselves to be questioned by the cry of reality.

The smartphone has come to reinforce the influence of the internet. Thanks to its immense communication networks, it has achieved an impressive global spread. In a few decades, it has become an essential device in daily life. We are reachable always, at any hour. Its fascinating possibilities have generated a profound socio-cultural discontinuity for which we still lack an ethical framework to guide an authentically human use: that is, a tool that truly fosters encounter and does not make us dependent on its continuous demands for attention. We know well that, even among ourselves, the mobile phone has introduced a logic of immediate availability that often conflicts with silence, contemplation, and the quality of community time.

To this list of effects, a reference to Artificial Intelligence (AI) cannot be missing—a fascinating technology that already has a direct impact on our lives. Serious reflections on its ethical dimension exist, emphasizing the risk of its dehumanizing power: delegating to a machine aspects intrinsically human. Creativity is also threatened. We cannot afford, out of laziness, to let a machine create in our place: creating is what makes us human. AI can be a good ally, but not a substitute.

Religious life is not immune to all this. Despite our long formative journey, technocapitalism—like a Trojan horse—has subtly penetrated our community dynamics. The internet negatively affects the time and quality of our fraternal life, and therefore our mission. We spend too much time in front of screens, taking time away from encounters with people, which are the heart of our consecration. It would be absurd to deny the positive potential of the internet, in the terms indicated by Berners-Lee, but it is urgent to reflect on what the internet is doing to our lives, at the personal, community, and missionary levels: three dimensions deeply intertwined in our Comboni charism.

2. The Effects of Techno-Capitalism on Community Life

The techno-capitalist paradigm tends to be based on an individualistic anthropology, which erodes the common good and reduces the person to a mere resource. This utilitarian view leads us to perceive our brothers as opportunities to achieve our goals,

transforming the other into a function for ourselves. The result is the sacrifice of community and solidarity: relationships built on functionality and superficiality. But individualism does not only distance us emotionally from others: it turns them into competitors or, worse still, into instruments for our personal ambitions.

The online sales-advertising duo has a huge impact on our habits of uncontrolled consumption. The ease of obtaining anything in very short times is extremely gratifying. Beyond the issue of superficial spending—already problematic in itself—there is a deeper theme: the search for compensation through the act of buying. We often criticize these social models, but it is not difficult to recognize them within our own communities as well. Not to mention the environmental impact of these behaviors and their serious implications throughout the entire production and distribution cycle. As missionaries, we are called to an integral ecology that considers not only the earth but also human relationships.

Time is that immaterial resource that says much about who we are and the priorities of our lives. Today we spend a great deal of time in front of a screen. Certainly, many apostolic activities require online communication and the use of the computer as a work tool. But we must ask ourselves about the quality of that time. We have heard that social media bring us closer to those who are far away and distance us from those who are near. They generate an emotional distancing from the here and now, fundamental for our pastoral service. Pope Leo reminded the Superiors General that the digital world can negatively influence our way of building and maintaining relationships. The risk is clear: while we believe we are expanding our presence, we may in reality be reducing the possibility of real encounters.

Our community health is deteriorating. Although living under the same roof, the qualitative time we dedicate to each other is less and less, and this leads us to lose interest in one another. The 2009 Chapter reminded us: "Fraternal life is a fundamental and indispensable element for our spiritual growth and missionary service. We must dedicate the necessary time and attention to achieving these goals" (n. 32). We do not live with people we have chosen, but with brothers called—as each of us is—to a common mission. This shared call invites us to see the community as a charismatic reality, not merely as a functional structure in service of the mission. The community has value in itself, as a bearer of a Word that proclaims Salvation. In contrast to the functionalist logic of capitalism, the community expresses the logic of unconditional welcome of the brother. In community, what each one produces is not measured.

The community is a school of life. Each one brings their own fragility, but the community is not the sum of its members' fragilities. Only through profound mutual acceptance can these fragilities be transformed into a source of life. Precisely because we recognize we are fragile, we can open ourselves to the need for help that comes from outside. This also makes us more humble in our apostolate. How could we speak of forgiveness and reconciliation among peoples, if we know how difficult it is to forgive the brother who lives with us?

In this sense, our intercultural life is a unique opportunity to open ourselves to the other, to the different. It helps us relativize our culture, or at least place it on a different plane with respect to what makes us truly human, where we find an authentic connection. Intercultural relationships are complex, they require time and energy, but

they represent an opportunity for self-knowledge that broadens our personal understanding within the group. And yet, here too, digital culture tempts us: offering us superficial connections, an illusory understanding of the "different," without the necessary time for true listening.

We cannot ignore the enormous impact of the mobile phone on our community life. Privileged moments of sharing—such as meals or meetings—are continually interrupted by the device's prompts. It is frustrating to converse with someone who is physically present but constantly busy responding to WhatsApp messages. On a personal level, it causes continuous interruptions to our activities, drastically reducing our ability to concentrate. There is now open talk of pathologies linked to smartphone addiction. Common prayer also suffers: how often do we find ourselves praying with a distracted gaze, our minds still on the latest notifications?

3. Paths for a Community in mission

After having highlighted the effects of the techno-capitalist paradigm on our community and mission, let us now consider some guiding insights that may illuminate a path beyond the limits it imposes—especially the problem of individualism, which is currently the greatest challenge to our missionary methodology. A missionary community transcends the mere sum of individual talents. Its foundations are as follows:

- **Theological:** It begins with Jesus' own action in sending his disciples out two by two and forming a community that proclaims the Gospel. This going and being together is itself an expression of a new kind of relationship. The Good News is, first and foremost, an opportunity for conversion for the messenger. The fraternity lived among disciples becomes a sign of credibility for the proclamation: communal mission does not only transmit a message—it embodies a new, reconciled, and fraternal way of relating among people who share a common call. The missionary community makes visible that the God we announce is communion, and that salvation is not only personal but also communal.

The encyclical *Laudato Si'* has shed light on an aspect too often forgotten or polarized: the integration of human promotion within missionary action. In speaking of integral ecology, Pope Francis provided us with the keys to understanding mission as a unified whole that embraces every dimension of the human person—an insight that Comboni also grasped and promoted. Today, there is a risk of neglecting fundamental dimensions of evangelization by placing excessive emphasis on sacramental pastoral care, thereby impoverishing our missionary outreach. A community that embraces the diversity and sensitivities of its members opens horizons toward a broader, more integral response. Personal, social, and spiritual dimensions mutually reinforce one another and help us avoid the extremes of spiritualism or materialism.

- **Charismatic:** For Comboni, the cenacle of the apostles was a foundational element of mission. From his earliest experience in Santa Cruz, he discovered the importance of community as mutual support—not only on a personal level but also in pastoral activity. Our history and tradition have successfully codified this value in our Rule of Life. Individualism is not a new problem, but today it

manifests itself with far greater force due to the profound impact of the technocapitalist paradigm on our lives. Community is the place where the charism is lived and continually renewed in dialogue with concrete missionary realities. Today, “the most poor and abandoned” reveal themselves in countless contexts. As an Institute, we are called in each place to discern what the Charism means today. The community is the privileged space for discerning missionary fields and methods, because it is the community that touches the human core of flesh-and-blood missionaries who feel personally summoned to respond. We need to develop a concrete methodology that both addresses present challenges and lays the foundations for a “know-how” that can endure over time and transcend individual competencies. This requires ongoing dialogue, periodic evaluation, and openness to the freshness of the Gospel. The ability to document apostolic work at the community level is a great treasure for the entire Institute, as it can inspire others to launch new initiatives in diverse contexts. Once we embrace the logic of communal mission, it becomes natural to extend it to other spheres of local Church life, the laity, or even broader social realities. It is a new way of understanding mission as a body—not through over-identification with any single work or project.

- **Anthropological:** In community, each person arrives with unique talents—expressions of gifts received. When welcomed, these become original and irreplaceable instruments. Yet the temptation of efficiency-driven logic leads us to construct an artificial and monotonous, image of persons, defined solely by a job description. The individual is thus reduced to a set of functions; anyone with the same competencies could carry them out identically. In this way, we nullify the gift that each person is in themselves. Everyone brings something new and different—something comprehensible only through the eyes of faith. No one is interchangeable: we all contribute with distinct sensitivities and talents. Certainly, specific competencies are needed for certain services, but beyond that, each interaction with the concrete mission is always new. When someone leaves a ministry, they cannot simply be replaced: another will come with different gifts and different ways of serving.

Intercultural life becomes a privileged opportunity for openness and deeper understanding of reality. Building mission within intercultural contexts means embracing a pastoral approach in which differences are not obstacles but manifestations of the countless facets of reality, seen through the missionary’s gaze. No single cultural group can monopolize the Institute’s missionary vision—a pitfall into which it is easy to fall. Therefore, whenever possible, we must create communities and circumscriptions that reflect the multicultural richness that constitutes us.

Some apostolic commitments exhaust people. Often there is a lack of integration into community life and reflection on what is being done. Each person is called to find a “healthy distance” in their commitment: we are not functionaries of a project, nor should we allow ourselves to be crushed by the weight of the injustices we confront daily. It is urgent to reestablish dynamics of ongoing formation within the community that make space for personal growth. Inner work and the transformation of injustice belong to a single movement of liberation: these two dimensions sustain each other and carry within them the verification of

their authenticity. This is where true sustainability lies—in pastoral action that nourishes community life, faith, passion for mission, and for the poor.

- **Social:** The periphery is a privileged place of mission. A missionary community is one that knows how to place itself not at the center—occupying spaces—but on the peripheries, the privileged theological locus: it is standing in solidarity with the journey of a people. It is the proper context from which to read reality, allowing ourselves to be questioned by its complexity and contradictions. Pope Leo reminds us in *Dilexi te*: “...it must once again be acknowledged that reality is best seen from the margins, and that the poor possess a unique form of intelligence indispensable for the Church and for humanity” (DT 82). This “being there” transforms us: it changes the way we see, drawing us ever closer to how God himself contemplates and embraces reality. The internet gives us the illusion of being everywhere, fostering numerous relationships—but it is easy to lose touch with the present moment and the local context as a theological place, the incarnate Word, the space-time where we weave our lives. The virtual world generates gratifying sensations, yet risks distancing us from the concrete reality of the world. The digital realm imposes a filter that distorts and conceals essential human dimensions.
- **Prophetic:** The religious community is a prophetic word that challenges the individualism generated by techno-capitalism. It bears witness that it is possible to live differently—placing care for the person above efficiency and productivity; living by the logic of forgiveness and sharing; building relationships in which we recognize Christ in our brother and sister. All of this is possible only in faith. It is a way of life that illuminates a fragmented society.

Conclusion

We are faced with a reality marked by the scourge of war, by the growth of poverty and exclusion. Techno-capitalism continues to conquer new spaces and impose itself as the dominant paradigm, promising solutions based on infinite economic growth that fuels personal ambition and individualism, eroding the social dimension, essential for our human development.

We have seen the fascinating attraction of technology and know we are not immune to the risk of being instrumentalized in its dehumanizing dynamics. Religious life is an alternative to this system: it bears witness to a radically different form of life, values community as the place where an alternative to individualism is built. It is prophecy in itself when it knows how to place itself in the peripheries, from where to imagine new possibilities starting from the Gospel.

But let us remain humble: perhaps we will not succeed in changing the world; what is in our hands is to let ourselves be changed, to allow the Spirit to dwell in us to transform us into instruments of the Father's mercy. What distinguishes us as Christians is that our hope does not depend on external conditions, always changing, but has its origin in the salvific event of the Cross, from which we learn to read history.

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